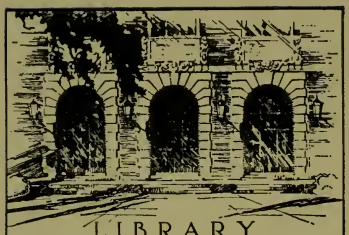
MONTENELLO



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MR MONTENELLO.

MR MONTENELLO:

A ROMANCE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE.

BY

W. A. BAILLIE HAMILTON.

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MR MONTENELLO:

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CHAPTER XVIII.

"FLORENCE!"

We have already referred incidentally to the stable department of Gerard's establishment, and to the circumstance that, owing to the kindness of the Dowager Lady Narborough, he had been enabled to keep a horse in London at a much lower cost than he could otherwise have done. He was now, indeed, keeping two horses in her ladyship's stables, the second of which had only been in his possession a few weeks. One of his first thoughts on obtaining the appointment of private secretary, and consequently a certain increase of his official income, was that he might now be able to keep another horse;

and he had given all the powers of his mind to the consideration of this important question. It was of course impossible for a gentleman with the modest income of £600 a year or thereabouts to think of going into the open market and bidding against others for high-priced hunters; and he knew that his only chance lay in picking up something on speculation on an off-day at Tattersall's—an uncertain and risky proceeding at the best of times,—or in hearing of something from a friend that was likely, for some reason or other, to be sold cheap. In this matter he had been much assisted by his chief, who, having an extensive acquaintance with horses and horse-owners generally, and having gathered from him in the course of conversation that he had a small sum at his disposal for the purpose, had put him up to the fact that in the draft of horses which had been advertised as about to be sold from the stables of that fine old sportsman Mr Hill, of Whitelands, there were one or two animals which it would be worth his while to look after, but which were not likely to attract much notice from the

general public. So it came about that, after an anxious afternoon at Tattersall's, and many misgivings and palpitations of heart as he found himself responding to the glances of the keen-eyed functionary in the rostrum, Gerard emerged from the crowd the possessor of a good-looking, iron-grey mare, which had been knocked down to him for thirty-seven guineas, and which, had it not been for a slight string-halt, would probably have fetched a good deal more. Thanks, however, to the good offices of his chief, he had learned that the mare, in spite of this infirmity, had the reputation of being a safe fencer, and though slow, in other respects by no means to be despised.

So he had gone boldly in for a bid, fortified, moreover, by the opinion of his friend Lady Narborough's coachman, in whose company he had inspected the mare on the previous day, and who had been pleased to express himself as on the whole in favour of the proposed investment, and had cited his own unbounded experience to the effect that a string-halt, though unquestionably a blemish,

was not necessarily a bar to the usefulness or trustworthiness of a horse.

It was with great pride of ownership that Gerard contemplated his two steeds as they stood side by side in Lady Narborough's stables. It is true that he was not without certain misgivings as to the cost of the venture in proportion to his limited means; but he had gone carefully into the matter on paper, and had satisfied himself that with strict economy he was now able to afford it. So he looked forward joyfully to an extension of his hunting performances during the coming winter, and felt as if he were equal to making a good appearance anywhere.

The immediate attendant upon Gerard's stud, whom we have previously mentioned as a helper under Lady Narborough's coachman, but who was now destined to enact the part of stud-groom on his own account, was an individual whose personal appearance would certainly not have recommended him to a casual observer as specially qualified for the charge of horses. He was a long, lank, sallow-faced man, of uncertain age, a melancholy

demeanour, and a general out-at-elbows look that was not at all consistent with the generally accepted ideal of a young gentleman's groom. When in his working clothes, and engaged in his stable avocations, he was a most woe-begone and dilapidated object; and even when at his best, and arrayed in somewhat more respectable garments, his appearance was suggestive of an undertaker's man very much run to seed. At the same time, and with all these external drawbacks, he was not without his good qualities. He was honest and hardworking, and decidedly handy with horses; and although at times stupid and obstinate, had never been known to be altogether overcome by liquor. He was a man, in fact, who, had it not been for his slovenly appearance, might have had a much better place than what he actually held. Gerard knew very little, however, about his antecedents; for a helper's character is not usually very closely gone into; and he had been simply picked up for him by Lady Narborough's coachman on the recommendation of a friend in the adjoining mews. But Gerard had taken rather a fancy to him,

partly, it must be confessed, because there was something about him that reminded him of James Pigg, the renowned Mr Jorrock's equally renowned huntsman; and finding that he really knew something about horses, he had during the previous winter been in the habit of taking him in the capacity of groom in some of his hunting expeditions from London. On such occasions he had, in spite of his rough and ungainly exterior, acquitted himself very creditably, and had proved thoroughly reliable both in the matter of money and sobriety. Gerard had therefore come to the wise conclusion that he might do much worse, and that his retainer's external deficiencies were more than counterbalanced by his intrinsic good qualities. So when the second horse made its appearance, he resolved to raise Martin's wages, and to endeavour to smarten him up a little. This, however, was by no means easy; for although Mr Martin had no objection whatever to having his wages raised, it was almost a hopeless task to attempt to instil into him any ideas of personal neatness; and the most that Gerard had hitherto succeeded in accomplishing was to

give his stud-groom the appearance of a fairly well-to-do scarecrow. But, smart or not, he was the sole auxiliary upon whom Gerard had to rely in his approaching expedition, and, as such, he determined to make the best of him.

It was a fine morning then, in the first week of December, that Gerard, who, by making use of the colourable fiction which we left him contemplating in our last chapter, had escaped from the paternal roof and made his way up to London the evening before, was engaged in finishing his breakfast and awaiting the appearance of Mr Martin. And just as he had come to the end of his second cup of tea, a ring at the door-bell, followed, after a due interval, by a knock at the door of his second-floor sitting-room, announced the arrival of that faithful domestic.

"Oh, good morning, Martin, how are you?" exclaimed Gerard, as the door opened. "Come in; I've just done breakfast. Well, how are the horses? You got my letter, of course, and I suppose you're all ready for a start? By Jove," he thought to himself, eyeing the unkempt-looking creature that

stood before him,—a threadbare black coat buttoned up tight over his stable dress, a ragged scarf hitched up under one ear, without a vestige of shirt-collar, and a tall, once-black hat that an old clothesman might have hesitated about picking out of a gutter,—"he's a rum-looking fellow to have about one. However, he understands his work, that's one comfort, and I can't afford to be too particular about appearances!"

"Oh, horses be well enough, thank'e sir," replied Martin, with a snatch at his lank hair. "Mare feeds right enough now, and has put on a bit of flesh; old horse uncommon fresh too. Had 'em out this morning; both on 'em fit to do a bit o' work now. Where might you be going?" he added in a somewhat searching tone; for he was of a stay-at-home and unenterprising disposition, and preferred the solid comforts of London, with an occasional day's outing that would bring him back to the metropolis in the evening, to adventures farther afield and the attractions of county society.

"Oh, well," replied Gerard, "I was thinking of taking a run down into Wealdshire and

the Underdown country. I have some friends down there," he added, not without a certain feeling of guiltiness and an instinctive consciousness that Martin would soon find out his real object in going; "and I hear it's a nice sort of country, and the distances not very great, so that one might do pretty well there with a couple of horses for a fortnight or so."

"Ah, Underdown," returned Martin, with a peculiar sniff that was habitual with him when expressing a decided opinion. "Yes, they be good hounds, and a good enough country. Harriers, too, Littlebrook; go as fast as the fox-hounds on them hills. Old horse do well enough there; don't know about the mare, though."

"Why, what do you know about them?" asked Gerard in astonishment, having quite expected some opposition on Martin's part, and much surprised to find, not only that he did not disapprove of the undertaking, but that he was already acquainted with the county.

"Why, Lord bless you," replied Martin, "I lived there two year or more, down at Netherdean, old Mr Baldwin's, away by the sea there."

Gerard started as if he had been shot. Netherdean! Old Mr. Baldwin! Could it be possible that this ungainly creature had actually been living in the same house, in the same atmosphere, with his—his—alas! he could not yet give a name to her—and had perhaps been in her company every day! He could hardly believe his ears, and stared at Martin in a manner which caused that somewhat unimpressionable individual to wonder what on earth was the matter.

"Why, Martin," he at length exclaimed, recovering himself with an effort, and feeling that it would not do to exhibit too great emotion on the subject, "you never told me you had been in the Underdown country. You told me you had been with Mr. Jones in Bedfordshire, and somewhere in Essex, but you never said anything about Mr Baldwin!"

"Ah, that were some time ago," responded Martin; "it were afore I went to Mr Jones, like. Let's see; it'll be a matter o' seven or eight year ago now, and Mr Thompson o' Scratton he were master o' the 'ounds then; nice gentleman he were, too; but I hear he's

dead and gone now." And Martin heaved a sigh, and assumed an expression of melancholy that would have led the casual observer to suppose that, if not a near relation of the lamented Mr Thompson, he must have at any rate been one of his most intimate acquaintances.

"But about Mr Baldwin," continued Gerard, beginning to regard Martin with a new and increasing interest. "I know Mr Baldwin a little; that is to say, I think I've met him. Let's see; he's an old gentleman who wears spectacles, isn't he? and he lives alone at Netherdean, didn't you say? And there's a young lady, isn't there, a niece of his, who lives with him—Miss Graham, or some name like that?"

"Ah, that'll be Miss Florence," replied Martin; "nice young lady, too, she were, and learnin' to ride fust-rate. But Mr Baldwin, he didn't care much about horses,—fond o' beetles and butterflies, and such like. Where was you goin' to put up?" he continued, evidently not particularly disposed to dwell upon the subject of Mr Baldwin and his domestic arrangements.

But Gerard could not answer for the moment. So he had found out her name! Florence—Florence—what a sweet name it was! and it seemed *like* her, too. Now he could think of her as his Florence, his darling; and she already seemed nearer to him. Oh, if only—— But he was recalled from his dreams by the reiterated inquiry of Mr Martin, this time propounded in somewhat peremptory tones, as to where he proposed to locate himself.

"Oh, well, I thought of going to Shawfield, Martin," he said; "it seems pretty handy for the Underdown country, and I suppose there's fair accommodation there. I daresay you know it. Where do you suppose is the best place to put up?"

"Swan at Shawfield," returned Martin with decision; "ain't a better hotel in the county. Good stabling, too; good accommodation for man and beast. Mr Clarke, as lived with Sir Thomas Wharton, he kep' it when I was there; but in course I can't say whether he's there now."

"Oh, the Swan," observed Gerard; "why not the White Horse? I've been to a ball

there, and it seemed a good sort of place. Do you suppose the Swan is any better?"

"Well, you can go to the White Horse, in course, if you like," replied Martin, with a sniff; "but I know where I'd go myself. Howsomever, that's for you to settle. What time will you be starting, sir?" he continued, with another dash at his head by way of a concession to appearances.

"Well, I'm not quite sure about that yet," returned Gerard, "but you'd better have the horses ready to start in the morning; and if you look in here this evening about nine o'clock, I'll let you know, and give you your orders." And having dismissed his attendant, Gerard prepared to indulge unreservedly in the luxury of his own reflections.

"Well," he thought, as he proceeded to light a pipe, and ensconce himself in a well-worn arm-chair in front of the fire, "this is a most extraordinary thing. Fancy old Martin having actually lived there, and my never knowing it till now. He must know all about her too, and of course she will remember him. I must get him to tell me something more about her. She can't be any relation of the

old boy's, or she wouldn't have spoken of him as Mr Baldwin. She must be his ward, or some one he has adopted. And fancy my having first heard her name from old Martin too! I suppose I should have found it out somehow or other down there, but it's nice to know it beforehand. I mustn't talk to the old beggar too much about her, though, or he'll smell a rat; he's as sharp as a needle, though he does look such a rum 'un. Anyhow, it's the most extraordinary thing that he should have lived there." And so Gerard sat and smoked, and thought himself into a pleasant reverie, in which visions of Miss Graham, or Florence, as he was now able to think of her, mingled with pleasurable anticipations of sport, and speculations as to how his horses would get over the Underdown country. For although Gerard was most decidedly in love, as he had for some time been obliged to admit, he was not so far gone as to be indifferent to the fascinating influences of his favourite sport; and his spirits rose as he thought of the prospect before him:—a country of good repute, a couple of very fair horses, and such an attraction, too, in the

background! Any lingering doubts, moreover, which he might have had as to the wisdom of his proposed expedition, were dissipated by this extraordinary coincidence about Martin; and he had very little difficulty in persuading himself that there was a special providence in it, and that he was only fulfilling his destiny. Ah, Florence, Florence! and he repeated the name over and over till he got quite ashamed of himself, and, jumping up and looking at his watch, found that it was past eleven, and that he had a good day's work before him. So, banishing for the moment the thought of his lady-love, he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and started off to put things straight at the General Enquiry Office, and make other necessary preparations for his departure.

CHAPTER XIX.

BEDDINGTON CROSS ROADS.

"Then I suppose, Peter, you ought to leave here about a quarter-past ten?"

"Better say ten, sir. It's over five miles to Beddington village by the downs, and the cross roads are a good mile beyond."

"Oh, do let's start in good time, padre dear," broke in a third voice; "I don't care how early I get up, and it would be dreadful to be late. They say Mr Egerton is so punctual, he won't wait a moment for any one."

"Well, start when you like, my dear," replied the first speaker, a grave-looking elderly gentleman, who has already been introduced to our readers as Mr Baldwin of Netherdean; "as I haven't got to go, it's all the same to me. Well then, Peter, say ten; and if Miss Graham is not ready, it will be her own fault if she is late."

"Oh, I shall be ready enough, you may be sure," laughed the girl; "and Peter," she continued, "you'll be sure and put the new front on Kathleen, won't you? I want her to look very smart."

"Yes, miss, I'll see to it," replied the old coachman, with a smile; and, with a respectful salute to his master, he withdrew.

The following day was to witness a great event in Miss Graham's life; for she was to have her first day with the foxhounds, under the protection of old Peter, who had lived at Netherdean in the capacity of Mr Baldwin's coachman for many years. As we know, she had been in the habit of riding about with the harriers for some little time past; but her great ambition was to be allowed to participate in *the real thing*, and to be introduced to the glories of foxhunting. So, partly by coaxing and partly by teasing, she had at the beginning of the present hunting season succeeded in inducing Mr Baldwin, who, as we have already seen, stood to her *in loco parentis*, to promise that, under the strict charge of old Peter, she should ride out and

"have a look at" the hounds some day when they met near Netherdean.

Beddington Cross Roads, as those who are familiar with the Underdown country will doubtless recollect, is at the junction of the hill country with the vale; and a run in that district is apt to present a very fair sample of the leading features of both. If a fox is found in one of the many sheltered deans that run up between the hills, or in one of the gorse coverts scattered about on their sunny slopes, he will very likely, in the first instance, take a line across the wide-stretching stubble or ploughed lands at the foot of the downs, thereby enabling his followers to make acquaintance with some nice little banks and ditches; but if there should happen to be no particularly inviting woodland to which he can make his point, he will in all probability turn his head to the hills again, and seek the friendly shelter of some wooded ravine, where he knows the chances will be very much in his favour. A meet at the cross roads, therefore, affords a favourable opportunity for seeing the country, and perhaps a nice little run, without the necessity for much hard riding; and is a

very different thing from some of the fixtures in the regular vale country, where a heavy soil and stiff fences will often present a pretty severe test for both horse and rider.

For these reasons the meet at the cross roads had been selected by Mr Baldwin, subject to the advice of old Peter, as a suitable occasion for a young lady to make her *début* with the hounds. The old gentleman himself, it must be confessed, had not much to say on the subject; for although, as we have seen, equestrian exercise was not unknown to him, and he would occasionally accompany Miss Graham in her expeditions with the harriers, it was more in the light of a spectator than an active participator in the sport; and he was as a rule quite content to sit at his ease on a hill, while his equally unambitious steed quietly cropped the short grass around him, and survey the operations of the busy pack from a distance, till an opportunity should offer itself of rejoining his fair and more adventurous charge in a safe and easy manner. But fox-hunting was altogether beyond him; and he had even resisted Miss Graham's entreaties to accompany her to the meet at

the cross roads. "Peter will look after you much better than I can, my dear," he said; "and I'm too old and not enough of a sportsman to mix with a crowd of strangers at a covert-side. No, you will do much better without me." But sportsman or not, the old man had seen enough of the girl's riding to feel that she was not likely to come to much harm, and he had the most implicit confidence in the trusty Peter. So he let her go without much uneasiness, and prepared for a quiet morning with his books.

There are few things in life pleasanter than a leisurely ride to covert on a fine December morning, when you have not very far to go, and feel that you are in plenty of time. The fresh air, the elastic motion of the good horse under you, and the quiet landscape around, lit up into momentary brightness by the gleams of a winter sun, all combine to lend a peculiar charm to the occasion, and to bring about a feeling of contentment and general philanthropy. And apart from the pleasant anticipations of the coming day's sport, there is a certain indescribable beauty about a still winter's day in the country that is not to be

found at any other time of year. The luxuriant foliage of summer has long departed ; and the glorious colouring of autumn, though still lingering here and there, is rapidly giving place to the soberer tints of winter. But even a dull winter's day has a quiet loveliness of its own that is often apt to appeal more keenly to the senses than the more pronounced attractions of other seasons ; and as the light breeze steals through the woodlands, and the shrivelled leaves accept their inevitable fate, and gently flutter down to their last resting-place, it must be a somewhat unimpressionable mind that does not recognise and appreciate the quiet if somewhat melancholy sweetness of the passing year.

But we have not come out to Beddington Cross Roads this morning for the purpose of moralising, and Gerard Courtenay, as he wends his way along the road from Shawfield, although by no means insensible to the beauties of nature, is, we fear, more engrossed by anticipations of the day before him than by the charms of the surrounding scenery. He had arrived at Shawfield two days before, horses, Martin, and all ; and having wisely

concluded that his own interests would be best served by humouring that faithful domestic as far as was consistent with the due preservation of his authority, he had resolved in the first place to examine the capabilities of the Swan, keeping the more consequential White Horse in reserve, in the event, which he considered extremely probable, of the former being unsuited to his requirements. He found, however, that Mr Martin had not been far wrong in his recommendation of the less pretentious hostelry. It was a quiet, old-fashioned, red-brick house, rather in the outskirts of the town, and standing back from the straggling street, with a fine old elm-tree overshadowing the horse-trough in front, while a corpulent aquatic bird in a sort of Italian landscape swung and creaked from a rusty iron bracket over the door. At the back was a roomy, old-fashioned garden, well stocked with vegetables, and with a row of bee-hives at the far end. The internal accommodation was not elaborate, but clean and comfortable as far as it went. Gerard found that he could have a fair-sized bedroom, and the use of a comfortable parlour, adorned with some quaint old prints, an

ancient and decrepit piano, and a stuffed cock-pheasant in a glass case, for a very moderate weekly charge; while a couple of very fair loose-boxes were available for his horses; and the landlord, who was no other than the identical Mr Clarke spoken of by Martin, now developed, together with his genial spouse, into a rotundity that was decidedly calculated to inspire confidence and suggest ideas of good living and general comfort, undertook to forage the noble animals at a moderate advance on the market rates. Altogether, Gerard was very well satisfied with his quarters, and felt that he might easily have gone farther and fared worse.

His first experiences, however, had not been altogether encouraging. He had been out the day before with the harriers, having ascertained that they met at a spot on the downs, which he calculated could not be very far from Netherdean, and had fondly hoped that he might meet Miss Graham. In fact, he had made so sure of her being there that he had been grievously disappointed when on arriving at the meet he had seen no sign of a habit among the little knot of soberly-

clad sportsmen, who eyed him inquiringly as he rode up. She might, however, not care to come out early, he thought, and would very likely join them in the afternoon; and his eyes were continually strained in the direction of Netherdean, the whereabouts of which he had ascertained in the course of conversation from a jolly-looking old farmer, who, with the usual well-intentioned compassion of a rustic for a Londoner, which he had by some process of reasoning divined Gerard to be, had taken him under his protection, and shown him the general "lay" of the country. It was constantly on his lips to ask the old gentleman whether he knew anything of Miss Graham, and whether she was likely to be out; but he somehow shrank from mentioning her name, feeling as if after all he had come down on false pretences, and had really no business there at all; and as no hint on his part would induce his friend to volunteer a word about her, he was compelled to stifle his anxiety as best he could. But the day wore on; and though his heart had once risen to his mouth by the sudden appearance of a well-mounted female

equestrian over the ridge of a hill, a closer inspection revealed a dashing-looking, dark-haired lady of the Amazon type, and in fact about as unlike Miss Graham as it was possible to be. Then he began to wonder whether she could be away, or ill; and he had half a mind to ride boldly up to the castle that contained his lady-love, and satisfy his mind about her there and then. So that day with the harriers was not particularly enjoyable for our friend; and, to make matters worse, he was not quite happy about the grey mare, which he had ridden with hounds for the first time, and which had got her head up in the air, and behaved generally in a fractious and uncomfortable manner, to say nothing of having flatly refused at a small bank and ditch, thereby very nearly discharging her rider—who, as we have said, had no pretensions to be a finished horseman—over her head. He consoled himself, however, as best he could by the reflection, which was indeed perfectly correct, that it was probably his own bad handling of the mare that had done the mischief, and resolved

to try her next time with a snaffle bridle. Having at length given up all hope of seeing Miss Graham, he left the field just as the afternoon was closing in and a drizzling rain beginning to fall, and retraced his steps somewhat dolefully to the Swan, where he passed a solitary and not very cheerful evening.

On the following morning, however, he awoke after a sound sleep, and felt his hopes reviving. It was a beautiful morning; he was going to ride his old horse, with which he was perfectly at home, and whatever happened, he felt that he had at least a prospect of a day's sport. So he ate his breafast with much zest, and by the time the trusty Martin had got everything in readiness, he felt quite himself again, and eager for adventure.

"Cross roads be two mile furder by d' road. You go through d' ba'arway, and along by dey gates, and you'll save half a mile, sir." So saying, in reply to Gerard's inquiries, a smock-frocked shepherd obligingly pulls down the top bar of a sort of gateway, or "barway," as they are called in Wealdshire, and Gerard,

hopping over the remaining obstacle, finds himself in a field-track leading through a line of gates in the direction of the undulating downs which stretch out on either side before him.

About half a mile further he emerges into a deep lane between high banks, with here and there an ancient yew-tree slanting across the road. Here he falls in with two black-coated sportsmen and one in pink, and at the next turn of the road he can see the caps of the huntsmen and whips bobbing up and down through the occasional gaps in the bank, while every now and then the crack of a whip, or an admonishing rate to a straggling hound, is borne back on the morning breeze.

And now the plot begins to thicken. A dog-cart drives past, with two muffled-up sportsmen, who exchange cheery greetings with the two in front of Gerard. Two more pinks appear round the corner of a copse skirting the lane; and by the time the cavalcade have reached the little grassy knoll, crowned by a cluster of stunted Scotch firs, that indicates the position of Beddington

Cross Roads, the field numbers some eighteen or twenty horsemen.

The huntsmen and whips dismount, and look to their girths, while the hounds indulge in a roll on the chalky greensward. Cigars are lighted, mutual salutations and inquiries pass from one to another, and the usual "coffeehousing" preliminary to the business of the day sets in vigorously. Gerard keeps modestly in the background, conscious of being the object of various curious glances and muttered inquiries, but feeling at the same time that whatever they may think of him, they are not likely to find much fault with the appearance of his mount. For the well-shaped old horse looks fit and well, and does credit to Mr Martin's grooming; and as he steps gaily out, and bends his neck lightly to the rein, he looks worth a good deal more than he really is. Gerard, we need hardly say, is got up in his best, in a well-fitting black coat, and boots and breeches to which not even the most fastidious could take exception. Both horse and rider, in fact, look neat and business-like, and public opinion is on the whole decidedly in their favour.

Meanwhile the field keeps increasing, and Gerard again looks out anxiously for the chestnut mare and her fair rider. Two ladies ride up, in one of whom he recognises his dashing-looking friend of the previous day. A third female figure is seen advancing in the distance, but of such ample proportions as require no second glance to convince him that it is not that of Miss Graham. And now the master has given the word for moving off, the hounds are eagerly clustering round the heels of the huntsman's horse, and Gerard begins to feel his heart sinking within him, when the click of a bridlegate behind him causes him to look round, and he sees an elderly and confidential-looking groom holding it open for a young lady on a chestnut. Can it be?—no—yes, it is! and for a moment everything seems to swim before Gerard's eyes. She passes close to him—so close that he can hear her speaking reprovingly to "Kathleen," that exemplary animal exhibiting some display of excitement on catching sight of the hounds,—but she does not notice him, and presses eagerly forward, closely attended by the trusty Peter, to join the crowd in front.

If Gerard had thought her rather nice-looking before, how much more did he admire her now, as his eye took in the graceful outlines of her slight, lissome figure, set off by the neatest of riding-habits, and swaying easily to every motion of her horse. The keen morning air and the excitement of the moment had brought a lovely colour to her cheek, and a gleam of sunshine shed a golden light over her soft brown hair. It was a fair picture to look upon, and more than one glance of admiration was cast upon her as she passed by.

Gerard felt a strange, indescribable exhilaration taking possession of him. He had found her again, his love, his darling, and he didn't care what happened now. He had "thrown his hat into the ring," and, come what might, he would do his best to win her. So he felt the old horse gently with his heel, and followed quietly in the wake of the hounds, content to bide his time till a fitting opportunity should occur of recalling himself to Miss Graham's recollection. It must be confessed that he was not without an uncomfortable pang of jealousy as he observed the marked attention paid her by various members of the

field; but he was partially consoled by observing that, with the exception of one or two grey-whiskered fathers of the hunt, who evidently looked upon her with a sort of feeling of proprietorship, she took very little notice of her admirers, and was apparently entirely engrossed by the all-important business of the day.

And now the first covert has been reached, a long triangular stretch of gorse, lying snugly in a hollow of the downs; no road within a quarter of a mile, and apparently the very place of all others that a fox on the look-out for comfortable quarters would choose for a temporary resting-place. And so it is, and many a fox has been viewed away from Parson's Gorse, by which name it is known to the many followers and friends of the Underdown Hunt. But, as is so often the case in hunting as well as in other matters, it is necessary to look a little below the surface, and beyond the immediate surroundings; and the eye of the practised sportsman, casting round for the points that a fox would be likely to make for, is speedily arrested by the now sober-tinted outline of Blackmore High

Wood, looming ominously in barely middle distance, and in fact little more than three-quarters of a mile away. If, as is highly probable, the fox at once makes up his mind that he will have a better chance there than in any of his other resorts among the wooded combes and hollows of the downs, the utmost that can be expected is a short gallop over a few fields, with the probability of spending the rest of the day in the deep and holding rides of Blackmore Wood. But if, on the other hand, he happen to be an animal of really sporting tendencies, and feels equal to pitting his own instinct and resources against those of the clamorous and unreasoning pack of curs that will persist in routing him out from his snug retreat, it is quite likely that, despising the friendly shelter of the neighbouring wood, he will strike boldly off in the opposite direction, and make his point for a more distant lair among the hills. Many a good run has in this way been obtained from Parson's Gorse; but it is at best a great lottery, and many a keen sportsman, returning home after an unsatisfactory day, has inwardly vowed that he will never go near the place again.

Somehow or other, however, he always turns up again, in the hope that this time he really will be in for a good thing; and so the gorse keeps up its name, and continues to be generally popular.

On the present occasion we regret to say that, although the hounds had not been more than two or three minutes in the gorse before a slight whimper from old Rummager, which was speedily endorsed by the rest of the pack, denoted that the "little red rover" was at home, we should be unable, even if gifted with the pen of a Whyte Melville or a Surtees, to place before our readers an account of a brilliant run. For from the moment when he was viewed stealing along the ditch at the south-east corner of the gorse, it was evident to all the knowing ones that his tendencies were on the side of prudence rather than of daring, and that his point was Blackmore Wood. Many indeed were the exclamations of "Told you so!" "Always the same thing!" "Much better grub up the gorse and have done with it!" and so on, that reached Gerard's ears, and that to an uninitiated stranger who had viewed the fox away,

and naturally assumed that it was all right, might have appeared somewhat unaccountable.

Gerard, it must be confessed, has not taken Blackmore Wood into his calculations, and in spite of the lamentations of the local sportsmen, is quite prepared to believe that he is in for a run. The fox has got away so quickly that he has not had time to come up with Miss Graham, who is now on the far side of the gorse, closely attended by one of the grey-whiskered old gentlemen already alluded to, and a stout, elaborately got-up young man, whom Gerard eyes with feelings of the most intense disgust. He has had time, however, to note that along the whole of the lower side of the gorse runs a wideish ditch, with a fair-sized bank beyond, and with no aids to crossing but a gateway about a hundred and fifty yards up on one side, and a sort of bridge or causeway about double that distance away on the other; and while he is wondering whether there is anything on the far side, the fox is viewed away. There is no time for further reflection; the hounds are already over the bank and into the adjoining field,

and the moment for decisive action has arrived. A glance to the other side of the gorse shows him Miss Graham and the old gentleman topping the bank together; and even at this moment of intense excitement his satisfaction is unbounded at seeing the stout young man scampering off vigorously for the gateway. Now the huntsman shoots past him, and rides straight at the bank and ditch, over which he scrambles with a narrow escape from a fall, demonstrating too plainly to any one who is inclined to follow him that there is another ditch beyond. But Gerard's blood is up, and he knows what his horse can do; so disdaining to follow some half-dozen of the field who are making for the bridge, he gets him by the head, and rides quietly at the place. The old horse takes it "on and off" as steadily and easily as possible; and in another moment Gerard finds himself in the same field with the hounds, and with the huntsman, Miss Graham, and her elderly cavalier, as his only companions. The majority of the field are congregated towards the upper side of the gorse, in the evident hope that the fox will break in that direction, and take the only line that is pretty

certain to afford a run, and are consequently for the moment "out of it."

"By Jove!" thinks Gerard to himself, who, it must be confessed, was not used to getting such a good start, "this *is* luck; I wonder if I'll ever keep my place!" There he is, however, for the moment at any rate; so he scuttles away up the rushy, undrained pasture in which he now finds himself, and is soon in the immediate rear of the huntsman. Miss Graham and her gallant old companion are still well to the front, and, in fact, perhaps rather nearer the tail-hounds than a strict master or huntsman would approve of. By this time, too, the gate-and-bridge contingent have come up, and form a highly respectable ruck about a hundred yards behind; while in the rear are the main body of the field, for the most part a disappointed and objurgatory body of sportsmen, loudly abusing Parson's Gorse and everything connected with it.

The fence out of the field is a thin, quick-set hedge stuck in the ground, which Miss Graham and the old gentleman fly abreast, closely followed by the huntsman and Gerard. This lands them in another roomy pasture,

over which the hounds are now streaming in full cry. The grass is sound and firm; the pace is tremendous; and for the moment Gerard experiences that indescribable feeling of exultation and perfect happiness that few things in this world can so adequately supply as a good start with hounds. But alas! his happiness is short-lived. A few muttered expressions of disgust from the huntsman, alongside of whom he is now galloping at best pace, cause him to cast about for the reason of this discontent; and even now the outskirts of Blackmore High Wood are showing conspicuously on their left front. The fence now in front of them, too, is a black, impenetrable hedge of thorns, to all appearance hopeless of negotiation, and with evident signs of a deep lane beyond. The only visible outlet is a "barway" at the far corner, and to this they with one consent direct their horses' heads.

The hounds have apparently divided in the lane, about half of them diverging along it towards the wood, while the remainder have flashed across and are scattered over the field beyond. The huntsman forces his horse up the opposite bank and through a gap in the

hedge, closely followed by Gerard, who is determined to keep his place as long as possible. "It's no use, sir," observed that functionary, turning round to Gerard with a touch of his cap; "he's into the wood; I know the way of him well enough. But if you would turn them hounds to me, sir, I'd be much obliged." So, with a blast of his horn, he trots on in the direction of the wood and parallel with the lane, while Gerard, delighted at being appealed to by such an important personage as the huntsman himself, lets down the thong of his whip, and getting the old horse by the head, proceeds to enact the part of a whipper-in to the very best of his ability. He is, however, soon superseded by one of the regular officials, who comes blundering into the field on a pulling, star-gazing brute that drags half the fence down with him, and by this time the lane is full of horsemen.

Gerard rides on with the huntsman, feeling an access of importance from his temporary association with that distinguished official. The fence out of the field they are now in is an up-bank, with a small ditch on the taking-off side, and the ground rising beyond, so that

all a horse has to do is make a spring and plant his feet well on the top, with nothing beyond to embarrass him. One of those places, in fact, that from a distance look as if they required some jumping, but are in reality extremely easy. Gerard rides boldly at it, feeling that the eyes of the sportsmen in the lane below are upon him, and with his arm well over his face to protect him from the interlacing twigs overhead, gets over very comfortably. The next field is a rough, hilly enclosure, beyond which any farther view is impossible; and an open gate into the lane on the left appears the natural and obvious exit. Gerard feels that for the time being he has done his duty, and rejoins the field with the pleasant consciousness that he must have been noted as one of the only three, besides the huntsman, who got away with the hounds. The lane is now blocked up with a noisy crowd, chattering and arguing as to the line of the fox. Gerard has for the moment forgotten all about Miss Graham, but now looks about anxiously for the chestnut mare. There are, however, no signs of her at present, but he consoles himself by the reflection that, as they all came into the lane to-

gether at first, she must be somewhere on ahead.

A turn in the lane now reveals Blackmore High Wood in all its winter beauty, or, from another point of view, in all the hideousness of a hopelessly secure retreat for a fox that prefers discretion to valour. Deep, clayey sides intersect each other in every direction, and the grey and weather-beaten old oaks, of which it is principally composed, give shelter to the thickest and most impenetrable underwood. Something must be done, however, and the huntsman gets together his now reunited pack, and dives into the uninviting recesses of the wood. He is followed by a section of the field, some actuated by the desire to be doing something, and others glad of the chance afforded by the sticky, holding rides of taking the fiery edge off their horses. The majority, however, remain outside, and discuss the chances of further sport, or explain to their friends how it was that they did not get away from the gorse with the hounds.

Gerard rides slowly on, feeling rather a stranger among the crowd. His thoughts

have now entirely reverted to Miss Graham, and he wonders whether she has gone into the wood, or round the outside; and if so, whether he should go after her or hang about with the rest of the field. So he moves on by the side of the wood in an undecided sort of way, the old horse every now and then stopping and looking round, as if doubtful whether they are going in the right direction for sport. Gerard is just about to turn back and rejoin the field, when, coming to a sharp corner of the wood, his horse pricks up his ears, and he finds himself face to face with Miss Graham.

CHAPTER XX.

DEEPER AND DEEPER STILL.

She was bending forward rather disconsolately, with one hand resting on the chestnut's neck; and in spite of the attempts at encouragement of the cheery old gentleman by her side, her face bore marks of disappointment, which even its natural sweetness of expression could not conceal. "How very unlucky!" Gerard heard her say, as he approached; "and my first day too! However, it can't be helped, and that little gallop was *so* nice." At this moment Gerard appeared round the corner, and she instinctively drew herself up, though without appearing to notice him.

Gerard felt a little awkward. He had evidently interrupted a *tête-à-tête*, and the old gentleman was looking at him in a manner which suggested that on the whole his room would be preferable to his company. He felt,

however, that he must not throw away such a chance; and instead of passing on, as was the evident desire both of Miss Graham and her companion, he advanced boldly towards them. Ladies are as a rule better hands at recognition than men. It at once flashed across Miss Graham that it was some one she had seen before, and as Gerard approached and took off his hat, with an attempt at a smile on his lips, and a heart beating violently beneath his corduroy waistcoat, she was not long in recognising her partner of the Shawfield ball.

"Oh! Mr Courtenay," she exclaimed, "is that you? I didn't know you at first in your hunting-clothes. Fancy seeing you down here! I had no idea you ever hunted in these parts."

Gerard had anticipated a question of this sort, and had prepared in his mind what he had intended to be a satisfactory explanation. But the sight of the face that had haunted him by day and night for the last month, and the sound of that gentle voice once more thrilling in his ears, had the effect of completely upsetting his diplo-

matic calculations; and he could only stammer out something about "Sydmonton — Underdown country — easy to get at from London"—and a few other utterly incoherent remarks.

"Oh, you are staying at Sydmonton, then?" inquired Miss Graham, catching at the name. "But that's a long way from here, isn't it? You must have had fifteen miles to ride, I should think. But I suppose you don't mind that, if you are fond of hunting?"

Gerard would have liked to reply that fifty miles more or less would have seemed as nothing to him, with the prospect of meeting Miss Graham at the end of it. He was, however, obliged to content himself with explaining, in a lame sort of a way, that he was not then staying at Sydmonton, and had only come from Shawfield, where he had come for a fortnight's hunting, having often heard of the Underdown hounds, and thinking he should like to see something of the country.

At any other time, Miss Graham might very probably have been struck by the evi-

dent confusion of Gerard's manner, and his somewhat laboured explanation of his presence in the Underdown country. But her thoughts being for the moment almost entirely occupied in various speculations as to the prospect of further sport, his embarrassment passed unnoticed. In fact, although Gerard was glad to escape the necessity for entering into further particulars, he could not help a slight feeling of disappointment, however unreasonable, at being received by Miss Graham with such an entire absence of emotion. And as he looked at her fair face and graceful figure, and thought what a charming creature she was, and how she ought to be admired, his heart rather sank within him. There must surely be heaps of fellows desperately in love with her; that fat lout, for instance, who shirked the first fence, but who was probably a great swell in those parts, and very likely rolling in money, what chance could he have against a fellow like that? And no doubt there were dozens of others; and yet, somehow or other, she didn't seem to know many people at the Shawfield ball, and seemed glad to have

him as a partner. And who was she? and what was her position as regards old Baldwin? He must find this out somehow, and by some means or other manage to get to know her more intimately, though how to set about it he was so far quite at a loss. Possibly he might manage to make some use of Martin in the matter, though this would have to be very carefully done. Anyhow, Martin, if sounded, could probably tell him something more about her, and he would certainly try this.

All this time the huntsman and hounds had been patiently working through the intricacies of Blackmore High Wood, assisted or impeded by a few of the field, who were anxious to share in the almost hopeless task of inducing the fox to break cover and betake himself once more to the open. There was a cold, intermittent scent, although a whimper every now and then proclaimed that it was not altogether lost. But matters were certainly not looking lively, and a drizzling rain which had begun to fall added to the general sense of depression and discomfort.

Suddenly, however, the deep note of a

hound is heard in the middle of the wood, and in a moment a burst of melody announces that the game is not up yet. "They're running!" exclaims the old gentleman, turning his horse sharp round. "Come along, Miss Graham." And the words are hardly out of his mouth before a brown shadow steals across the ride a couple of hundred yards before them. "Hold hard! There he goes!" he continues, reining up sharp and holding up his hand; "we may have a run yet." A few moments of suspense, and the hounds stream across the ride in full cry, followed closely by the huntsman, who crashes through the stiff underwood as if it were so much paper. "Now come along, my dear;" and away goes Miss Graham up the ride after her ancient pilot, closely followed by Gerard. A turn to the left brings them into a broader ride, which runs out into a corner of the wood, already occupied by a whip, who sits motionless on his horse, prepared for immediate action in the event of the fox breaking on that side. And just as our friends are within fifty yards of the cover, a piercing view-halloo announces the much-desired event.

The wood is bordered by a rough, overgrown hedge, with a drop into the field beyond. Miss Graham and her conductor diverge to the left, and scramble down a sort of track. Gerard, however, burning to distinguish himself before his charmer, and tired of doing nothing, rams his horse at the fence in a somewhat careless manner, trusting to providence to get safely over. But the thick straggling growth has concealed the inequalities of the ground below, and though the old horse clears the hedge well enough, he lands on a greasy sloping bank, and catching his feet in a network of "growers," comes heavily on his head. Gerard described a complete somersault, but with the exception of a hat neatly flattened over his eyes, and a general plastering of mud, was none the worse. On scrambling up, however, and getting to his horse, he to his dismay perceived blood trickling freely from a cut on the off forefoot, evidently the result of an "overreach" in his struggles to extricate himself.

"What a d——d fool I was!" thought Gerard, looking back at the nasty place he had come over. "Poor old boy!" he continued, patting the trembling animal and ex-

amining the injured foot. "It was my fault, and not yours. It doesn't seem very much of a cut; but I can't go on riding him with his foot bleeding like this. Now they'll have a run, of course, and I'm out of it, and serve me quite right. I must get out of this beastly place, and find my way back to Shawfield." And gathering up the reins, he was preparing to mount and retrace his steps, when the tramp of horses caught his ear, and looking up he perceived Miss Graham and her companion riding slowly towards him, and presenting no appearance of participating in a run.

"Hallo!" exclaimed the old gentleman as they drew near, "been down? That's a nasty place to come over; you should have followed us down the 'rack.'"

"Yes," replied Gerard, feeling rather foolish; "it was my own fault. I didn't look where I was going, and my horse came right on his head."

"I hope you're not hurt, Mr Courtenay?" inquired Miss Graham, with a semblance of anxiety; "you must have had a bad fall, I'm afraid."

"Oh, I'm not a bit hurt, thanks," returned

Gerard, scarcely daring to look up in the sweet face that was bending down towards him with, as he endeavoured to persuade himself, a certain expression of interest. "My horse has cut his foot, but I don't think it is anything much, though it bleeds a good deal."

"Oh, dear, I'm so sorry," she exclaimed; "what will you do with him? Mr Percival," addressing her elderly friend, "do look at it; you are so clever about these things. By the way, Mr Courtenay, let me introduce you to Mr Percival. Mr Courtenay and I," she explained, with a slight blush and a hesitation that to Gerard seemed perfectly charming, "met at the Shawfield ball."

"Here, catch hold," said Mr Percival with a grunt, dismounting and throwing his reins to Gerard. "Now then," lifting up the injured foot, "let's have a look. Ah, I see; only a flesh cut; won't do him much harm; very likely be all right in a week. Lucky for you it's not a couple of inches higher; would have struck the tendons then, and laid him up for a month. You ride him home quietly, and he'll do well enough. You might

as well get the place washed out, though. Where are you staying?"

Gerard explained, not without some embarrassment, that he was at that moment domesticated at the Swan at Shawfield.

"Shawfield," observed Mr Percival; "well, that's eight miles from here. Let's see; your best way now would be over the downs, if you knew the way, and past Netherdean. I daresay now," looking at Miss Graham, "Mr Baldwin wouldn't mind the horse being brought in for a minute, and Peter could give the place a wash with some warm water."

"Oh yes, of course," exclaimed Miss Graham, eagerly. "Here is Peter," as that functionary, who had never altogether lost sight of his young mistress, now appeared round the corner. "We can all go together, —that's to say," addressing Mr Percival with a tinge of melancholy in her voice, "if you really think it's no use stopping any longer."

"Well," replied Mr Percival, "you can stop if you like, but you won't see much more here, I expect. They will go on to

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Raxton after this, I suppose, but that's five miles from here, and right away from Netherdean; and if you've got to be home early"——

"Yes, I promised Mr Baldwin I wouldn't stop out late," she replied. "Perhaps I'd better go home."

"But the fox?" inquired Gerard. "I thought he was viewed away—what happened to him? Has he got back to the wood again?"

"Got back!" grumbled Mr Percival; "I should think so—sneaked along the hedge-row there, and was back in that corner almost before the hounds were out of the wood. They'll do nothing with him now, but I suppose they'll go on after him for another half-hour or so before they give it up."

"By Jove, I'm in luck," thought Gerard. He had not missed a run, after all, and he was actually going to be taken to Netherdean — to the place where *she* lived — the centre of the world to him, in fact. It all seemed like a dream, or some special interposition of Providence, and he could only mutter out something about his thanks,—afraid of giving trouble, &c.

"Well, we had better be getting on," observed Mr Percival, who had now remounted, "or your horse will be getting stiff. I'll see you as far as Sellinge," addressing Miss Graham, "and then I must be going home myself, as I have got a friend coming down by the afternoon train; but if you like to take your friend on to Netherdean — I daresay Peter will have a look at that foot again."

So the three rode slowly off, followed at a respectful distance by the trusty Peter, who had not as yet delivered himself of an opinion as to Gerard's fall, or as to the state of affairs in general, but who had possibly none the less taken in the bearings of the case and formed his own conclusions on the subject.

"I am so sorry you have not had a run," observed Gerard to his fair companion, as they emerged from the wood into a muddy lane where there was not room for three to ride abreast, and where, consequently, Mr Percival, as the leader of the party, forged ahead. "That wood seems an awful place, and I suppose the next covert would be too far for you on a wet day like this."

"Oh! it wouldn't be the least too far," she replied, "but I promised Mr Baldwin I would be back early to-day. You see it's my first day with the fox-hounds, and he thought I should be tired if I stopped out too long. But I shouldn't have been the least tired," she went on; "only he is so kind and thoughtful about me I couldn't bear not to do as he wishes. But I am so sorry about your fall, and your poor horse, as you could have gone on, of course, and they will probably have a run from Raxton."

Gerard would have been ready enough for a run from Raxton on any ordinary occasion, but in the present instance he could not help thinking that a ride home with Miss Graham the first day of meeting her was cheaply purchased by the loss of a possible run. However, it was necessary to say something about "his own fault,—better luck another time," and so on. But, somehow or other, the conversation flagged, and Gerard did not succeed in taking that advantage of the four miles road-riding between Blackmore High Wood and Netherdean, which, under the circumstances, might fairly have been expected.

Netherdean was an old-fashioned house of the type so common in that part of Wealdshire—something which, having begun as a farmhouse, had in the course of years expanded by gradual enlargements and additions into a sort of manor-house or "place." It was built principally of red brick, which, by long exposure to the weather, had become mellowed down into a sort of French grey, here and there almost white, and only retaining its original colour in certain sheltered corners. There was nothing whatever of architectural beauty or design about it, and its component parts were incongruous to a degree. Some of the windows retained their old casement fittings, while others were of more modern and light-admitting fashion. On one side was an evidently modern wing, the red-brick colouring of which had not yet been sufficiently subdued to harmonise with the older parts of the building, while the stables and offices, which were attached to the house, had been rebuilt or enlarged with a mixture of flint and rough-cast. The whole was surmounted by a low, red-tiled roof, with a row of dormer windows peeping over the stone

coping, and various irregularly-shaped chimney-stacks scattered about at intervals. The house stood back about a hundred yards from the road, from which it was separated by a low brick wall overhung with evergreens, and with a handsome iron gate in the centre, giving access to a circular carriage-drive, leading up to the front door. A modest, unpretentious-looking place altogether, but presenting the appearance of being thoroughly snug and comfortable.

Gerard, however, was not at this moment particularly disposed either to criticise or admire the points of Netherdean. He was now alone with Miss Graham, always excepting the presence in the background of the faithful Peter, Mr Percival having left them at a little village about a mile back. And as they approached the house, and he felt that he was actually at her home, and was about to be admitted as it were, for however brief a period, to her life and daily surroundings, he experienced an overpowering feeling of shyness and nervousness, and was in fact quite unequal to the occasion. Luckily for him, however, Miss Graham exhibited no such uneasiness.

She appeared, in fact, to look upon him rather in the light of a chance wayfarer who stood in need of assistance, and showed no signs of being in the least anxious to receive him as a visitor. She led the way up a side entrance into the stable-yard, and was off her horse before Gerard could dismount and assist her. And here a slight awkwardness arose. Here was Gerard, a comparative stranger, with a slightly damaged horse, and to a certain extent in a position to claim hospitality. And yet, having got him there naturally enough, Miss Graham seemed all of a sudden to be in doubt as to what to do with him, and stood for a moment irresolute.

She was relieved, however, by the interposition of Peter, who now came forward, and touching his hat, intimated to Gerard his readiness to examine the injured foot, while a helper emerged from the stable and took charge of her horse. "Then I will say good-bye, Mr Courtenay," she said, with a slight blush, "unless"—with a little hesitation—"unless you would like to come into the house while Peter looks after the horse."

It is needless to observe that Mr Courtenay

would have liked nothing better; but the invitation was not given in such a manner as to render its acceptance a matter of course, and he did not feel quite equal to taking advantage of it. So he stammered out his thanks, and his fears that he ought to be getting back to Shawfield, and so on, although all the time he would have given the world to leave his horse to Providence and Peter, and enter the charmed abode of his lady-love.

"Good-bye, then," she continued; "I am so glad to have met you again. Perhaps I may see you out hunting again when your horse gets well—or I daresay you have got another?" And with a sweet little smile, that went straight to Gerard's heart, she turned away and tripped into the house.

A few hours later, Gerard was sitting in his solitary room at the Swan, and ruminating over a pipe and the events of the day. He had accomplished his purpose so far, certainly. He had seen and conversed with Miss Graham, and had actually escorted her home. This was not bad for a first day's work. But, somehow, he was not altogether satisfied. He felt as if he had

not made the most of his opportunity, and reproached himself for not having been a little more marked in his demeanour towards the fair object of his affections. And then, too, she seemed so utterly unconcerned; and although evidently pleased to see him, seemed to look upon him merely in the light of an ordinary acquaintance. Though, after all, how could he expect anything else? Well, he must hope for better luck next time; and she certainly did speak as if she would like to see him again. Oh, how lovely she looked as she said good-bye to him! And he tried hard to fancy that she had guessed his secret, and was not disposed to think the worse of him. So he mused and pondered, in a troubled and uncertain frame of mind, till he found himself overcome by sleep, and very nearly dropping into the fire, when he wisely concluded that it was time to go to bed.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE LIBRARY.

The adventures of a young gentleman in love, although interesting to the last degree to himself, and possibly to the one other person most immediately concerned, are apt, after a time, to pall upon even his most intimate friends, and to become a positive nuisance to the world in general. We shall not, therefore, try the patience of our readers by following Gerard step by step through the various incidents of his stay at Shawfield. The day after his meeting with Miss Graham was peculiarly tedious. There was no hunting, and all he could do was to go and look at his horses in the stable, and wonder when the old horse's foot would be sufficiently recovered for him to go out again. A country town of the Shawfield type is at its best sufficiently dreary; but to Gerard, in his restless state of mind, its dreariness soon became almost insupportable.

He contemplated the possibility of going up to London for the day, and coming down again in the evening; but found that it was too late for the morning express, and that he would simply have to pass the day in the train. He then began to consider whether he could with any appearance of reason or propriety ride over to Netherdean and call upon Miss Graham. But he could hardly summon up courage enough to venture on this; and the idea of the mysterious Mr Baldwin in the background was somewhat repelling. A ride, however, would be better than doing nothing; so, having hung about the town during the morning, he mounted the grey mare about two o'clock, and rode over the downs in the direction of Netherdean, feeling that, if he could not actually go and call at the house, it would be something to be near her, and indulging in a sort of vague hope that he might come across her either riding, walking, or otherwise disporting herself in the vicinity. But although he hovered about for some time, and went as near the house as he considered justifiable, he could see no sign of the form that was

now dearer to him than anything in the world, and was compelled to return home disappointed. Still the ride itself did him good, and enabled him to get on better terms with his new purchase; and he found himself able to enjoy his mutton-chop dinner at the Swan, and even to take some mild interest in an ancient and dog's-eared novel which he found, among other literary curiosities, on a shelf in the corner of the room.

By the time, however, that Gerard had been at Shawfield ten days or thereabouts, the aspect of affairs had materially changed; and although he hardly dared to allow himself to hope that the course of his love was beginning to run smoothly, he certainly could not complain of being debarred from the society of the object of his affections. He had met her out with the harriers, and twice again with the fox-hounds, on the latter of which occasions he had enjoyed the rapturous felicity of a fairish run in her company over a nice, practicable country, the grey mare, with whom he had now arrived at a very comfortable understanding, having carried

him to his entire satisfaction. More than this, he had actually met her in Shawfield, whither she had driven with Mr Baldwin one afternoon; and had been allowed to take charge of her, and stand at her elbow in various shops while that estimable old gentleman was transacting business with his solicitor. And each time he saw her, he became more and more hopelessly in love.

And now he was to have a still better opportunity of enjoying her society than even the hunting-field could afford. He had been invited to dine with Mr Percival, the old gentleman who had acted as Miss Graham's escort and pilot the first day he had met her out. Both Mr Baldwin and Miss Graham were to be there; and there were rumours, which had received no positive contradiction, of a small dance afterwards. This seemed to Gerard to open up a prospect of an evening's unbounded happiness. He would be able to dance with her again—several times, perhaps—and if only he could manage to sit next her at dinner! He had received a verbal invitation from Mr Percival out hunting, who had at the same time casually informed him of

whom he was going to meet; and during the day he had alluded to the subject in conversation with Miss Graham, and had expressed his delight at the prospect of another dance with her. For in those few days their acquaintance had certainly ripened into something almost approaching to intimacy; and Gerard would, to his surprise, find himself talking to her as if he had known her all his life. He could not help feeling that this was in a great measure due to the entire absence of restraint or embarrassment on her part; and could have wished, perhaps, that she did not talk to him in the same unconcerned manner as she appeared to talk to others. But there had been moments when a look or a word from her had set all his pulses throbbing, and had made him fancy that she guessed and sympathised with the secret of his heart. On that last day with the hounds, indeed, when they parted at the foot of the downs, just as a deeper glow was creeping up into the clear afternoon sky, and a slight feeling of frost began to pervade the air, she had given him a look and a gentle pressure of the hand that had sent him home in a state of almost

delirious happiness, causing his estimable landlady at the Swan to think what a pleasant and good-tempered young gentleman they had got for a lodger.

There is nothing new in the "old, old story." And yet, who is there of us who does not feel that his or her own particular story has something about it with which the experiences of others can only be flat and commonplace? Love's memories, as in other relations of life, are often made up of little things; and a word, a look, a pressure of the hand on some particular occasion, especially if during that sweet though maddening period when we begin tremblingly to hope that our love is returned, will remain engraven on the tablets of the mind and set the pulse throbbing long after other recollections are dead within us, and our hearts have become hardened and indifferent to what we once looked upon as the prospect of heaven upon earth.

A dance in the country is at any time a most welcome form of entertainment, and all the more so when it comes about in an impromptu and unexpected manner. Much

excitement had therefore been created in more than one fair breast in the neighbourhood by the report of the contemplated dance at Crowhurst Park. The rumour, indeed, soon developed into a certainty, various notes having been received by those interested apologising for the shortness of the invitation, and explaining that the whole thing had only been got up on the spur of the moment, principally at the instigation of a sailor nephew of Mr Percival's, who was staying there on a short leave of absence, and who would be compelled to rejoin his ship in a few days. It must be confessed that there were some lamentations over the want of time in which to prepare for the festivity, and the impossibility of appearing, on such short notice, in anything "fit to wear;" but somehow or other everything seemed to come right by the evening of the dance, and at any rate nobody would have thought of passing an unfavourable criticism on the general appearance of the bevy of Wealdshire beauties who assembled under Mr Percival's hospitable roof that December night.

There are few private houses whose resources

are such as to admit of a dinner and a dance being given on the same night without the former being in some way or other made to give way to the latter. And although the entertainment at Crowhurst was originally and ostensibly a dinner-party, including among the guests a proportion of the heavy fathers of the countryside and their equally substantial better halves, who as a rule would decidedly object to their dinner being cut short, or their symposium over the fire in any way interfered with, it was wonderful with what good humour they submitted to the arrangements rendered necessary by the crowning event of the evening.

It is not, however, necessary to the due development of our story that we should chronicle at length the progress of the Crowhurst Park dance. Let us rather content ourselves with an extract, as it were, of the night's proceedings, and take a glance at two persons who, towards the close of the entertainment, and when one or two early-retiring chaperones have already taken flight with their charges, are "sitting out" a dance in a remote corner of the library. To tell the

truth, indeed, they have been there during the last two dances; and yet they display no immediate intention of abandoning their position, which, shielded as it is by a heavy screen both from the fire and the rest of the room, offers advantages not to be despised by any two individuals who may be desirous of a little private conversation.

And yet, retired as is the situation, and comfortable the sofa on which the pair are seated, their demeanour does not on the whole suggest the idea of perfect happiness. The face of the lady bears an anxious, troubled expression, that contrasts somewhat sadly with the fair young brow and slight, girlish figure. Her companion is quiet and earnest, but also presents an expression of intense anxiety. Their actual conversation at the moment, however, would not strike the listener as of vital importance, or of a nature calculated to arouse feelings of anxiety or distress.

"How curious," she says in a half-interested, half-abstracted voice, "how curious that you should have got a man who had lived with us. Oh yes, I remember him

perfectly. He was called John then, and I had almost forgotten what his other name was till you told me, but I remembered it as soon as you mentioned it."

"Yes, isn't it curious?" was the rejoinder. "I can't tell you how astonished I was when he told me that he had once lived at Netherdean. It seemed so strange to think that he must have seen and known you long before I did."

A blush was the only answer, accompanied by a downcast look, and a nervous manipulation of her fan. It was evident that the conversation was of a more interesting nature than might at first have been supposed.

He was getting nervous too. "Yes," he went on, "I told him one day that I thought of coming down to Shawfield to hunt, and I never was more astonished in my life than when he proceeded to tell me all about the place."

"But—but what made you think of coming to Shawfield?" she timidly and hesitatingly asked. "There's much better hunting in other places, isn't there?"

"Oh yes, of course, there are better countries," he replied. "But then, you know, the Underdown country is very good—don't you think so yourself? And it is so easy to get at from London, you know. In fact—in fact," he continued with some embarrassment, "I think it is a most delightful country, and I only wish I could stay a little longer."

"Why, you are not going away?" she said, raising her eyes for a moment to his, with a look that sent the blood coursing wildly through his veins; "you have only been here about a fortnight, have you?"

"Yes; I am afraid I shall have to go in a day or two," he replied. "You see I am not my own master, and I have got work in London. I wonder when I shall see you again?"

No answer. But the small, fair head was slightly averted, and the look of distress had returned. It was evident that matters were becoming interesting.

"It seems quite a long time since I first saw you," he continued, hardly daring to look at her, but playing nervously with the tassel

of her fan, which she had half let fall, "and now I don't know when I shall see you again."

She seemed to endeavour to speak, but the words refused to come.

"Shall I tell you," he said, in a voice that seemed to him hoarse and unnatural; "shall I tell you why I came to Shawfield?" and, as he spoke, the hand which held the fan came, he knew not how, in contact with hers, and he felt that he could no longer restrain himself.

"Miss Graham—Florence," he murmured, "I can't bear it any longer. I must tell you how I love you. I have thought of nothing else ever since I first saw you, and this was the only way I could think of to see you again. Florence, Florence," he went on, wildly, having now got entire possession of her hand, though she still kept her face away from him, "won't you look at me, and tell me if I have any hope?"

She turned her face slowly towards him; but oh, what a sad, sorrowful look there was in those soft, gentle eyes! a look of distress and anguish that absolutely fright-

ened Gerard, and made him drop the little hand he was still holding in his own. "O Florence!" he exclaimed, "what have I done?"

"Stop," she half whispered, wildly, "for Heaven's sake, stop. You must not talk to me like that. You don't know—— Oh, let me go, let me go!" And she rose hurriedly from her seat, and made a step forward, as if to leave him.

"Florence, Florence!" exclaimed Gerard, seizing her hand again, "you must not leave me like this. Tell me what it is, for God's sake, and forgive me if I have done anything wrong."

"Oh, no, no," she hurriedly replied, "but I can't tell you, and you cannot understand. Let me go, please, please," in a tone of passionate entreaty. And gently but firmly disengaging her hand from his grasp, she tore herself from him and disappeared from the room.

Gerard stood for a few moments dazed and stupefied. He felt as if he were in a dream, and that if he waited a little he would awake and it would all come right. He came out

from the corner behind the screen, and stood before the fire, looking mechanically at the clock on the mantelpiece, and wondering what he should do next. A strain of music came through the half-open door, and he found himself listening attentively to catch the air. It was the old "Journalisten" valse —the one he had danced with her that first night at Shawfield. Then he slowly came to himself, and a feeling of unutterable misery began to steal over him. He turned to the sofa where they had been sitting, and, throwing himself upon it, buried his face in his hands, and strove to collect his thoughts. Then he remembered that others might be coming in, and that it would not do for him to be discovered there; and he rose and moved towards the door. There was something white on the floor, and he stooped and picked it up. It was a little lace handkerchief she had dropped in her flight—yes, there was the "F" embroidered in the corner, and the faintest possible fragrance of some delicate scent clinging to it, which he had already begun to associate with her. He kissed it passionately, and placed it in his

breast. "I'll keep this till I die," he muttered to himself, and slowly passed out of the room.

How Gerard got back to Shawfield that night he hardly knew. He had an indistinct vision of passing through the hall which separated the library from the ball-room, and finding himself in the portico outside, with the stars looking down coldly and pitilessly on his wretchedness. Then he remembered that he had left his coat behind, and returned to the cloak-room to look for it. On the way he met a chance acquaintance, who addressed some casual remark to him, which he must have answered rather wildly, as the speaker stared hard at his pale face, and then turned abruptly on his heel. Luckily, he found his coat at once, and again crept out into the open air. Carriages were beginning to take up, and hooded and cloaked damsels were being escorted out by their attendant cavaliers. Laughter and cheery good-nights were going on all round, and more than one glance of surprise and curiosity were directed at Gerard, as, looking neither to the right nor left, he made his way out at the door, and dis-

appeared in the darkness. As luck would have it, he stumbled almost into the arms of the flyman whom he had engaged from Shawfield for the night, and who had by no means calculated on getting his fare away from the ball so early; and in a few minutes more he was jolting along the road to Shawfield.

Gerard sat back in a corner of the fly in a sort of stupor. It seemed to him as if his life had come suddenly to an end, and as if he were in another state of existence. The events of the evening seemed to have passed away from him, and to have happened long, long ago. And there he was, looking out into the starlight, and able to think what a beautiful night it was, and to wonder whether the frost would stop hunting the next day. His chief sensation was one of intense weariness, and longing for rest. The drive to Shawfield seemed, somehow, very short, and he found himself standing at the door of the Swan, and talking quite calmly to the driver, while a sleepy boots was being roused up to open the door. In a few

minutes more he was in his bedroom, and calmly preparing to go to bed. And, strangest of all, within two hours of his parting with Florence Graham, he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXII.

ANODYNES.

THERE is no truer saying than the old adage that "Heaven tempers the wind to the shorn lamb;" and this is especially true in the case of those troubles and disappointments which come to us while life is still young. There must be few who, when recalling some great, and at the same time crushing sorrow, cannot also, if they honestly examine themselves, recall some little incident or episode, some merciful dispensation, which has somewhat softened the blow, and enabled them to bear a burden that otherwise would have seemed too great for human nature to endure. A time may come, alas! when, the elasticity and recuperative power of youth gone for ever, and nothing left to look forward to but a dark and hopeless vista of years, we begin to realise that life is for us over, and that we have been crushed down by a weight which

no power but the angel of death can remove. But while there is anything left of youth and hope, it must be indeed some very terrible and unusual sorrow that does not bear with it in its train some ray of mercy and some gleam of light that will suffice to preserve the soul from utter despair.

It was, perhaps, the best thing that could have happened to our disappointed suitor that next morning, when he was yet scarcely awake, and only just beginning to realise what had taken place, a letter from Lord Ravendale, marked "immediate," was brought to him in his bedroom, requesting his prompt return to London, provided — for his chief was always most considerate in these matters — that he had nothing special on hand that day, in which case another day's delay would not signify. The letter went on to state that in consequence of the sudden illness of the Secretary of State for the Aboriginal Department, Lord Ravendale had undertaken to superintend the preparation of an important measure to be brought before Parliament in the coming session, which would give him a fortnight or

three weeks' hard work, and would necessitate the attendance of his private secretary, not only for whatever assistance he might be able to render in getting up details and particulars connected with the forthcoming effort of legislation, but also as a medium of communication with other heads of departments on certain points which were likely to require careful consultation.

This summons, which under other circumstances might perhaps have been rather unwelcome, was hailed by Gerard with a feeling of intense thankfulness. He had already begun, in those waking moments, to feel a sensation of despair and hopelessness stealing over him,—a longing to hide his head somewhere, and be at rest,—while, at the same time, he hardly dared think of what he was to do next. And now it was all settled for him, and he had simply to obey orders. He roused himself, therefore, with a great effort, and sending for Martin, informed him that he himself was obliged to return to London by the first train, and that he and the horses might follow at their leisure. We are bound to say that, under ordinary cir-

cumstances, Gerard might have felt some diffidence in communicating such sudden and peremptory orders to his faithful domestic, who had made himself extremely comfortable at the Swan, and was by no means inclined to approve of such an untimely departure. But, for the moment, he was regardless of everything but his own immediate concerns; and having packed his things and eaten his breakfast with something of the feeling of a man in a dream, he took leave of his genial host and hostess, who expressed the most unfeigned regret at his sudden departure, and just managed to catch the 10.30 train to London.

On arriving at the office, Gerard was warmly welcomed by his chief, and at once set to work. He had a long day, and scarcely a moment for indulging in his own thoughts; nor was he even left alone in the evening, which he could not help looking forward to with dread; for Lord Ravendale pressed him to come and dine with him in Grosvenor Square, and by the time he got to bed he was thoroughly tired out, and, to his great surprise, found himself quite disposed for sleep.

It is true that on the following morning there was a reaction, and that as he opened his eyes in his accustomed lodgings, and the recollection of the last few days rushed back to his mind, a feeling of desolation and misery began to take possession of him, and the whole world seemed hopelessly dark and dreary. The reappearance, too, of Martin with the horses did not tend to raise his spirits, especially when that worthy announced, not without a feeling of secret satisfaction, as it seemed to Gerard, that the grey mare had got a cold, and didn't seem at all the thing that morning. But he was due at the office early; so, "pulling himself together" with a painful effort, he sallied forth, and was soon at work again.

A week passed in this manner, by the end of which, however, Gerard had had very little leisure for indulging in solitary reflection. The full weight of his sorrow had therefore been somewhat broken, and instead of brooding over and giving way to it, he had only had time to think of it at intervals. And although on these occasions he would feel

very crushed and sick at heart, the pain he experienced had lost some of the sharpness that it would otherwise have possessed, and had subsided into a sort of dull and undefined sensation of something wrong. Sometimes he could hardly bring himself to believe that the whole thing was not a dream, and that there was such a person as Miss Graham in existence. And then he would have recourse to the little relic of which he had possessed himself, and the whole scene would come back to him with a vividness that was only too real. At these times he would go over all that had passed between them on that eventful night, and would rack his brains with thinking what could have been the meaning of her strange behaviour. There seemed some mystery about her—something which made her different from any one else. And yet, too, she had been so sweet and kind to him with it all. He could not with truth tell himself that she had actually encouraged him, but she seemed to take a pleasure in his company; and oh, how exquisitely happy those few days with her had been! What could it mean? Had he merely been too precipitate, and

frightened her by his sudden declaration? No; there was something more than that, and nothing could have been more decided or more apparently hopeless than his rejection. But give her up he would not, as long as there remained the faintest ray of hope for him to cling to; and he passionately kissed the little embroidered handkerchief, which he now treasured as the most precious thing in his possession.

What considerably added to Gerard's discomfort at this moment was the circumstance of his having absolutely no one to confide in or ask advice from. He had repaired to Hatfield Street on the day after his arrival, with the intention of unburdening himself to George Morton, whom he now looked upon as connected in a sort of way with the story of his love. But he found to his disappointment that not only had his friend been absent from his lodgings for the last fortnight, but that he had left no address, and had intimated that it was highly probable that he might not return for some time. No cross-questioning of the landlady could elicit any information on the subject, except that, a day or two before,

a person dressed like a superior mechanic had called with a note from Mr Morton requesting her to give his letters to the bearer, but giving no address. There were a good many letters, and she had handed them over accordingly. The man either could not or would not answer any of her questions as to Mr Morton's whereabouts, and she had not an idea as to their destination. In fact, she would not have given them up, but that she knew Mr Morton's writing so well, and knew, moreover, that he would not be at all pleased if his injunctions were not obeyed. "For you see, sir," she concluded, "Mr Morton, he is rather a strange gentleman, though we are all very fond of him; and he has strange fancies about things sometimes, and can't bear to be contradicted."

There was nothing for Gerard, therefore, but to bear his sorrow in secret; and to do him justice, he set to work to face it manfully, and to make the best of any distractions that might fall in his way. As we have already observed, his official work was the greatest possible relief to him, and took him out of himself in a manner which at the time he was hardly able to sufficiently appreciate. A man,

moreover, who is the owner of two tolerable hunters, and is by nature a sportsman, must be very far gone in despair if he is quite unable to make any use of them; and when the first pressure of business connected with the preparation of the new Aborigines Consolidation Bill had subsided, Gerard found that, as usual, he had a day or two to spare every now and then, which—with some little effort at first—he devoted pretty regularly to hunting from London.

Somehow or other, therefore, the time slipped away, till Gerard found to his astonishment one morning that it was six weeks since that memorable night at Crowhurst Park. He had passed his Christmas quietly and sadly enough in London, having been glad of the excuse afforded by the pressure of his official work for not going down to his own people. And although he could not yet bring himself to think calmly of what had passed, and was still inclined to take a gloomy view of life in general, it had unquestionably been to a certain extent softened down. On hunting days, indeed, he would feel almost himself, and for a time forget his

troubles altogether; and he was now looking forward with a sort of melancholy pleasure to an approaching visit to the Mount-Eastons at Bellmoor, one of Lord St Ives' numerous places, which was for the time occupied by his eldest son and his family, and where there was to be a small party to finish up the shooting. It would be a relief, he thought, to see and have a talk to Lady Mount-Easton; and perhaps he might venture to confide his love affairs to her, and come in for a little sympathy and good advice.

And so it fell out that late one afternoon towards the end of January, Gerard found himself landed on the platform at a junction on the North-Western Railway, somewhere on the borders of Westmoreland and Yorkshire, and waiting for a cross-country train that was to take him on to his destination. It was a chilly, wild evening, and after some seven hours' confinement in a railway carriage, and with the prospect of another hour and a half before him, he was glad of the opportunity of stretching his legs; and having superintended the changing of his luggage, and ascertained that his train would not

start for another half-hour, owing to the lateness of the south express for which it was timed to wait, he set to work to walk briskly up and down the platform.

There is a good deal more poetry and romance about railway travelling than is generally supposed. We will not go so far as to say that there is anything particularly suggestive of either in the general appearance and surroundings of a station on the underground railway, a London terminus on a foggy winter morning, or an average railway refreshment-room. These, however, are mere details; and if the idea of poetry may be associated with that of power, the stupendous force of steam may surely be considered as affording a fit subject for the poet as well as for the scientific man. Nor is the poetry of steam locomotion to be confined to the mere vastness of the invention; for, if only we take the trouble to look for them, it is difficult to avoid being struck by the many points of interest which present themselves to the eye in the course of almost any railway journey of a few hours' duration. It is but rarely that a railway scene has been selected as a

subject for the artist; and yet in these days, when almost every possible incident of every-day life has been represented in every conceivable form, until it would seem impossible to find a subject that had not already been worn threadbare, it seems strange that such a field as is offered by the many and various incidents connected with railway travelling should not have been more utilised. It may perhaps be thought almost profane to suggest that the picturesqueness of a landscape could be improved by such a commonplace object as a line of railway; but if there is anything in the force of contrast, as we are generally taught to believe, it would be difficult to find anything more effective than the combination, under certain conditions, of the triumphs of human skill with the quiet majesty of nature.

It is not our business, however, to write a treatise on railways in connection with art, either pictorial or poetical; and it will be sufficient for our purpose to observe that as Gerard waited for his train on this particular occasion, he could not help being struck by the picturesque appearance which the approach of evening had begun to impart to

the surroundings of what is recorded prosaically enough in Bradshaw as Long Heaton Junction. It had been a wild, stormy day, and there was still a good deal of wind; but the rain had passed off, and the moon was rising in a clear sky, only occasionally obscured by a rapidly drifting cloud. Gerard went out to the extreme end of the platform and looked about him. The station was situated just at the edge of a wild moorland district, which stretched away on one side towards the now dim and indistinct hills in the far distance, while on the other the mist was beginning to rise from the low-lying fields in the valley up which the line had wound for some miles. The station buildings, which the approach of night had relieved of their natural stiffness and angularity, formed a dark, shadowy mass in the foreground, and the converging lines of rails, now glistening in the moonlight, stretched away into the distance until lost sight of round a curve where a tall signal post stood up sharply against the sky, with a red light twinkling from its summit. Other lights, white, red, and green, began to spring

up all round in a mysterious manner, and to reflect themselves in a dark reservoir constructed for the supply of water to the engines, which by daylight might have looked artificial and commonplace enough, but which, in the shadows of night, and out there on the moorland, might with a very slight stretch of imagination have passed for a natural tarn. The bustle of the station had subsided with the departure of the last train; and scarcely a sound was to be heard but the ceaseless music of the wind among the telegraph wires, and a mysterious rumbling from the hollows of the distant hills, where some heavy goods train was slowly labouring up a steep incline.

Gerard stood for a few moments enjoying the fresh evening air, and thinking how delicious it would be if by any possibility he were going to meet Miss Graham at Bellmoor; and then, beginning to feel rather chilly, retraced his steps along the platform. The train by which he was to continue his journey was drawn up in a siding, and all ready to start. The engine was already attached, and there was a great bubbling of water going on

in the tender, with occasional puffs of steam, and other mysterious noises indicative of a desire to be off. The driver and fireman were leaning over the side-rail together, smoking and staring out into the darkness, occasionally exchanging a monosyllabic remark, but otherwise to all appearance half asleep. Gerard had completed two or three turns of the platform without bestowing more than a casual glance upon the engine; but as he passed by for the fourth time, he observed that one of the men appeared to be looking intently at him. He thought nothing of this, however, and passed on; but as he turned at the other end of the deserted platform, he noticed that the man had got off the engine, and was advancing slowly towards him. They passed each other within a couple of yards, and somehow or other there seemed to be something familiar to Gerard in the man's appearance. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a slight stoop; but as he had a fur cap drawn over his eyes, and the lower part of his face was concealed by the turned-up collar of a heavy pilot-coat, there was scarcely enough of his features visible in

the dim light for purposes of identification. They passed and re-passed twice; but at the third meeting the stranger seemed to have satisfied his mind on the subject, for instead of passing Gerard again, he stopped short in front of him, and pushing his cap back from his forehead, emitted a grunt of recognition.

Gerard started back in amazement. It was George Morton!

CHAPTER XXIII.

MOSSHOPE FELL.

When two friends meet suddenly and unexpectedly, their greetings to each other for the first few moments are apt to be somewhat incoherent. Gerard was so completely taken aback by coming across Morton in this most unforeseen manner that he could only stare at him, and make use of one or two broken expressions of astonishment. "George! By Jove! is it possible?" he exclaimed at length. "Why, what the devil are you doing here?"

"Doing?" replied Morton, who was more collected; "well, if you particularly want to know, I'm engine-driving — going to work this train to Starlington as soon as the South express comes in."

"But, my dear fellow," returned Gerard, in the greatest amazement, "what on earth made you take to this sort of thing? I have

been wondering what the deuce had become of you—thought you must have gone back to South America or somewhere ; but this beats everything."

"Well, Jerry, old boy," replied the other, "there are some things that take a deal of telling, and this is hardly the time and place for a long story. Perhaps I may tell you some day, but in the meantime, you understand, I'm here on the quiet, and I don't particularly care about my whereabouts being known. I had some doubts about speaking to you, but, somehow, I couldn't help it."

"George, old man," replied Gerard, with warmth, "you know you can trust me, and I'll keep it dark, no fear. But only fancy you being an engine-driver ! What on earth put that into your head ? "

"Well, my dear fellow, after all there's nothing so very remarkable in it. You see, I was brought up for this business once, and why shouldn't I take to it again for a bit ? But never mind me, Jerry, just now, and tell me about yourself. How are you getting on, and how's the young woman down at—— Ah, let's see, I've forgotten the name of the place now."

"George, old man," replied Gerard hurriedly, "I'm so glad I've met you, for it's the very thing I wanted to talk to you about." And he proceeded to impart to his friend as briefly as possible what had happened, and how his expedition to Shawfield had ended in sorrow and disappointment. "But, George, old fellow," he went on, "I don't mean to give her up, I can tell you; though sometimes I feel very hopeless and miserable. I'm awfully glad I've met you, as I was longing to have a talk to some one about it, and there's no one else I should much care to tell it to."

"Well, Jerry, old boy," returned Morton, with a friendly pressure of his arm, "you know you can trust me, and I'm glad you should like to tell me all about the business. But cheer up, old fellow, and perhaps it will all come right some day. That South train's very late to-night; I'll just go into the office and see where she is."

"I say, George," exclaimed Gerard, "I'm going by this train, you know, as far as Bellmoor. Can't I come with you on the engine? it would be great fun."

"Well, I don't know about that," replied

Morton, doubtfully; "it's against all the rules, you know, and some fellow might make himself nasty about it. However, I'll see the stationmaster, who's a good sort of fellow, and knows I wouldn't be likely to play the fool, and perhaps we may manage it on the quiet. You wait here till I come back," and he went off to the stationmaster's office.

"Well," he said, on rejoining Gerard, "I've squared it, though he doesn't half like it; but the train won't be full, and being dark, let's hope no one will notice it. Look here; show me where your things are, and I'll say a word to the guard, so that he will know what to do with them."

"By Jove, what a lark!" exclaimed Gerard, in delight. "My small things are in one of these carriages,—oh, here they are,—and my luggage is all right in the van, for I saw it put in."

"All right," said Morton. "Now then, the South train is only about three miles off, and will be here directly. As soon as she comes in sight round that curve, you just slip quietly down by the end of the platform there, and come round on the off side of my engine. I'll

give you the word to get up just before we start, and then no one will see you. Oh! here's the guard; I'll just say a word to him, and if you like to give him half-a-crown afterwards, it will make it all right. I must go and see after the engine now."

Gerard obeyed his instructions implicitly. In a minute or two the whistle of the South express was heard, still some distance away on the moorland. The station began to wake up; porters appeared from various corners; the few passengers who were going by the branch train, and who had not already taken their seats, emerged from the waiting-room, and began to bustle about as if they had not a moment to spare. Gerard walked to the end of the platform, and as the head-lights of the approaching train came into view round the curve, stepped down on to the rails, and slipping round to the far side of the engine of the waiting train, took up his position under the friendly shadow of an empty goods truck. The South train came gliding on, the huge express engine seeming to tower above him as he stood on the ground, and drew up at the platform. There was a ringing of bells, a

shouting of porters, and rumbling of luggage-trucks; and then a momentary lull, a cry of "Any more going on?" a sharp whistle, and the train was off again.

The whole remaining interest of Long Heaton Junction was now concentrated on Gerard's train, already kept waiting some twenty minutes over its time. As Gerard stood in his concealment, he could hear the stationmaster and guard adjuring the passengers who had changed from the South train to make haste, as the Starlington train was very late, and there was not a moment to spare. He kept his eyes fixed on the engine, in expectation of Morton's signal; and in a another minute a figure came to the side, and beckoned to him with a low whistle. Gerard hurried up, and, aided by the friendly hand of the fireman, climbed up the ladder-like iron steps of the engine, and found himself on the footplate. Morton was leaning over the other side, looking out intently for the signal to start. He looked round, and nodded to Gerard; but in another moment the guard's whistle was heard, and, with an acknowledging wave of the hand, he seized the regulator,

gave a sharp jerk to the steam whistle, and they were off.

The sensation of being on a railway engine was quite new to our friend Gerard, and he had some doubts as to where he ought to stand, and how to behave generally. Morton was peering out fixedly into the half darkness, and apparently completely absorbed in his duties; but his friend the fireman now came to his assistance, and indicated a corner where he would be out of the way, while he himself opened the furnace door and began to stoke vigorously, the flood of light that burst forth producing a most picturesque and Rembrandt-like effect on the shining machinery, the dark figures of the driver and fireman, and the black mass of the train behind. There was something, too, about the motion of the now rapidly-gliding engine that was peculiarly exhilarating; and as they rushed through the fresh night air Gerard felt his spirits rising, and began to think that life on an engine must be rather a pleasant thing.

A rattle and jolting of points, a flash of red and white signals, and they were past the junction, and gliding smoothly along the

diverging line across the moor. This point of danger past, Morton relaxed his vigilance for a moment, and beckoned to Gerard to cross over to his side of the engine. "All right now, old fellow," he said; "you stand behind me, and then you'll be out of the way. Glad to see you've got your ulster on; you'll find it cold before you've done with it."

"George, old boy, I think it's capital fun," replied Gerard. "I must say, you're quite the engine-driver, and no mistake. Why, one would think you had been at it all your life."

"Ah," rejoined Morton, with a sad smile, "well, I must say that if you want to get taken out of yourself, I know nothing better. Won't do to think of anything else when you're running through a station at forty miles an hour, and have got to look out for signals. There's one now," he continued, as a twinkling white light appeared some distance in front of them; "that's the Canobie distance signal, and we're sometimes stopped there; but it's all right to-night, so we shall run right through."

"This is a quick train, isn't it?" inquired Gerard; "we seem to be going no end of a pace now."

"Yes, we run hard to Corby Bridge, twenty-three miles, without stopping; and then there are only two stoppages between that and Bellmoor, where you get off."

"I say, George," suddenly exclaimed Gerard, in alarm, "where's the other fellow?—he's gone: why, he must have tumbled off!"

"Oh, he's right enough," replied Morton, smiling, "he's only gone forward to see to the head-light, or something. Here he is again," as a figure suddenly appeared on the other side of the engine, and joined them on the footplate. "Rum old fellow," he muttered to Gerard; "Ezekiel is his name—Ezekiel Jones; they run a good deal on Scripture names down here. Don't talk much, but a good old chap, and been on this road ever so long."

So they rushed on through the darkness, Morton occasionally exchanging a few words with Gerard, but all the time never relaxing his look-out ahead, except now and then to alter the position of the regulator, or turn

certain other mysterious-looking handles. The prophetically-named fireman, a wooden-faced, impassive-looking individual, who might have been any age between forty and sixty, had now relighted his pipe by the process of inserting a long iron rod into the furnace until it became red-hot, and leaning against the brake-handle with his arms folded, kept the same watch on his own side. They flew past station after station, sometimes with a touch of the steam-whistle by the driver, at others with no sign but the wave of a lamp from a solitary stationmaster or porter on a lonely platform. At length a twinkling of many lights began to manifest itself some distance ahead. Morton suddenly pushed back his regulator as far as it would go, and began to look anxiously round the corner of the weather-board, while the fireman applied himself diligently to the wheel of the brake, and the speed of the train began to perceptibly slacken. Two or three short, sharp whistles from the engine were responded to by a grinding and scraping from the brakes on the carriages behind, and in a few moments the train was almost at a standstill.

"Signals against us," muttered Morton to Gerard, "something shunting at the station, probably. Ah! it's all right now;" and with a sharp touch of the whistle, and a whirling round of the brake, they shot on again, and pulled up at the platform of Corby Bridge.

The moment the train stopped, Morton was off the engine, with a long-spouted oil-can in his hand, and Gerard, looking over the side, could see him poking about among the machinery, inserting the spout here and there, and examining certain confidential localities with the greatest care. Having thus made a circuit of the engine, he reascended on the off-side, and resumed his conversation with Gerard. "We shall be here five minutes or so," he said; "we wait for a short train from Tarnforth, and she's not in yet. Hallo! there's the up-train coming in. There's a queer old fellow drives it, I should like you to see him; been on this road over thirty years; he's a scriptural cove too, Elijah Wilson they call him. Zeke," turning to the fireman, "those are Elijah's lights, eh?"

The fireman, thus apostrophised, looked over the side of the engine at the lights of an

advancing train, and with a nod of his head and an elongation of a mouth the dimensions of which had certainly not been contracted by nature, intimated his opinion that the lights in question were no other than Elijah's. On came the train, and drew up at the opposite platform, the two engines being almost abreast. The driver of the newly-arrived train swung himself off, and proceeded to go through the same evolutions with an oil-can that Morton had already performed on his own account; and having seen that all was right, and regained his foot-plate, looked across and greeted Morton and his fireman.

"Good evening, Mr Wilson," observed Morton, in return to the other's salutation; "how's the bank to-night?"

"Ah, lad, it's just fine," was the answer; "ye'll no' need the pilot up Mosshope Bank the night. But ye're late; ye should be atop o' Summit by this time."

The speaker was a tall, powerful-looking, elderly man, with grizzled hair and beard, a weather-beaten face, and a keen piercing eye, that seemed always looking into space. His upper lip was shaved, showing deeply indented

lines about a mouth the expression of which denoted energy and decision. The sort of face, in fact, that one would be glad to see on one's side in a life-and-death struggle, or on any occasion where courage and presence of mind are called into play. And where is this more likely to be the case than in the daily life of an engine-driver—a man who carries in his hand not only his own life, but the lives of thousands of others? Yet he is one of a class of men little known, still less understood, and rarely given a thought to, except perhaps when a column or two of the daily papers are taken up with the report of some ghastly railway accident, and we read how a driver or fireman, after doing everything in his power to avert a collision or save a train that had gone off the rails, had been found buried in the ruins of his engine, to which he had stuck to the last with a dogged and self-sacrificing obstinacy, knowing all the time that he was rushing into the jaws of death.

"Yes," returned Morton; "had to wait half an hour at Long Heaton for the South train, and now I shall have to wait another five minutes for the Tarnforth, I suppose. Ah!

here she is," as a short train appeared round the curve of a little branch line, and ran into the other side of the station.

A few moments more, and, with a parting jerk of the hand from each driver, both trains were off almost simultaneously, there being but two passengers from Tarnforth for Morton's train, and none for the other.

"What was that you were asking him about a bank?" inquired Gerard, as soon as they were well under weigh again.

"Oh, it's a heavy incline up Mosshope Fell, about six miles from here," replied Morton. "We call inclines banks, and there's always a pilot or bank engine waiting to give a shove up to any train that wants it. But the old gentleman says it's all right, and we've got a light train, so we shall run up alone. Sometimes, when the rails are slippery, and with a heavy train, it's an awful business. Mind yourself, Zeke's going to fire up again."

On they sped again through the wild moorland. The moon had quite risen by this time, and the view, as they got into a still wilder and more rugged country, was picturesque in the extreme. The air, too, became keener and

keener, and Gerard turned up his coat collar, and was glad to get as much shelter as was afforded by the weather-board. They stopped at a small station a few miles farther on, and after this all signs of human life or habitation seemed to disappear altogether.

"There's the bank-engine waiting," observed Morton, as they started again, and passed an engine with steam up, waiting in a siding. "All right to-night, Peter," he called out to the driver, a burly individual with a huge red beard, who was standing on the ground near his engine, but stepped across the rails and mounted on to Morton's as the train slowly moved off; "shan't want you to-night; old Elijah says the bank travels well, and my train's very light."

"Ay, ay," rejoined Peter, "ye'll get up fine; but there'll be the goods behind ye will need me, I'm thinking. Eh! but it's just a bonny night, and ye'll see the whole country fra' the top o' Summit;" and, watching his opportunity, he swung himself off on to the ground with a wave of his hand, and was soon left behind.

Another mile or two, and they were begin-

ning the ascent of Mosshope Bank, a steep incline of about three miles on one side, with a gradual descent of some six or seven on the other. More steam was applied, and the engine puffed away vigorously, but the speed of the train began to be considerably reduced, and Gerard could feel that the work was now "against the collar." Still, the rails were pretty dry and the train light, so they jogged steadily up at a very serviceable sort of pace; and the reduced speed enabled Gerard to have a little more connected conversation with the driver.

"I say, George, old boy," he began, "you know this game of yours beats me altogether. It's the queerest thing I ever heard of; and I can't make it out even now. How do you manage with the other drivers and fellows, for instance? I should have thought they wouldn't have cared about a chap like you coming in among them in this sort of way."

"Oh, there's not much bother about that," replied the other. "They know I'm only on a temporary job, and that sort of thing is often done. There are fellows who want to qualify for something—railway berths in the

colonies, and that sort of thing—and they come on as firemen or drivers for a bit, just to learn the practical part of the business. Of course one must be a regular engineer, though, and have been through the shops and all that sort of thing; they won't have any humbug about it. But, you see, I did all that some time ago; and these fellows think I'm just qualifying too. Of course I had to begin as a fireman, so as to learn the road, and the signals, and all the rest of it. I fired with old Elijah Wilson for nearly two months, and have only been driving this last week; in fact, I ought by rights to be still firing now."

"Well, it's a rum go, anyway," remarked Gerard. "I say though, George, it's beastly selfish of me to be always thinking about myself. There's something wrong with you too, or you wouldn't be at this business. Anything I can do for you, old chap? I wish you'd tell me."

"Never mind me, Jerry, my boy," replied Morton, lighting his pipe. "I'm a queer sort of fellow, you know; and I won't say that I haven't got my troubles, like most other people. Perhaps I'll tell you some day;

"but just now I'm all for being let alone, you understand; and you know me too well to mind that. Perhaps I may turn up again in London before long; but, anyhow, if you want to write to me, a letter will always reach me in course of time, if you write to the old place. I'm living at Starlington just now; but, you see, I've got another name when I'm driving. If ever you really wanted to find me quick, you must write to George Adams, 7 Railway Buildings, Starlington, where I stop when I'm off the road. But I'd just as soon keep quiet there, you understand, and the other place would find me right enough."

"All right, old boy," returned Gerard; "I quite understand; but I do hope it will come all right some day—all right for both of us," he added, with a sigh, "though I can't say I feel very hopeful about myself. But I'm awfully glad to have seen you, anyhow, old man; and it's an immense relief to me to have been able to tell you all about it."

"Ah, Jerry," replied Morton, "if only my business could be as easily settled as I expect yours will be, I shouldn't think much about

it. I'll just tell you one thing, though, old fellow. Don't have any nonsense about it, and be sure you know your own mind, or by G—d," he added, in a voice that startled Gerard by its stern tone of warning, "you'll be sorry for it some day. Now hold on hard, as we're over Summit, and shall go down the other side like blazes."

They had now reached the top of the incline, or "summit," according to railway phraseology, indicated by a lonely little signal-box, a siding, and a rough water apparatus rising on piles out of a deep pool by the side of the rails, and looking like a gigantic beacon in a ridiculously small sea. The driver of the bank engine had not gone beyond the truth when he spoke of the view to be obtained from this eminence. A wide expanse of hill country stretched far away on all sides ; here a sharp edge standing out clear in the moonlight, there a glen or valley shrouded in deep mysterious shadows which gave a fantastic and unreal appearance to everything around. The hills were not as a rule steep or precipitous ; but there was a peculiar grandeur and dignity in the rolling sea of moorland and fell

that stretched away in an apparently boundless succession of wave-like ridges, which in the uncertain moonlight had the appearance of being far more mountainous than they really were.

"By Jove, what a lovely night!" exclaimed Gerard, steadying himself against the weather-board; for they had begun the descent of the incline, and although all steam had been shut off, they were gliding down at what seemed a terrific pace. "It's worth anything to have seen this," he continued; "hang it! I wish I was an engine-driver!"

"Ah, it's all very well on a fine night like this," rejoined Morton, slightly altering the position of a lever, "but it's quite another thing in rough weather. Some of these poor chaps have a real bad time of it now and then, I can tell you. But I'm glad it's so fine to-night, as you're here, and this is an uncommon pretty run, to be sure."

So they skimmed along, almost noiselessly, with a mysterious, unaccountable sort of motion that was very fascinating, now rounding a corner of some dark hill, now skirting the edge of a shadowy valley, and now rumb-

ling over some little mountain stream; but all the time evidently getting towards lower ground. They flashed past one or two desolate little stations, and then evident preparations were made for a stoppage. Morton made a quick sign to the fireman, who commenced to work the brake vigorously, and himself looked over the side and towards the rear of the train, as if to take an observation.

"Stop at Mosshopefoot," he said to Gerard, "and have to begin to pull up three miles off, it's such an incline. We've come these last five miles without any steam at all, you see. Haven't got the continuous brakes on this part of the line yet, but we want them uncommonly here."

After leaving Mosshopefoot, the aspect of the country became quite different, the line now running through a wide valley or strath alongside of a fair-sized stream; and in another ten minutes they had begun to slacken speed for Bellmoor, the station whither Gerard was bound.

"Well, Jerry, my boy," said Morton, as they ran into the station, "we must part

company here. I'm awfully glad to have seen you and had a chat about things. Perhaps I'll see you again soon, perhaps not; anyhow, you know where to write if you really want anything. Good-bye now, and God bless you." And as if anxious to avoid any further farewell, he grasped his oil-can, and swinging himself over the side, almost before the engine had stopped, began to busy himself among the machinery. And in five minutes more Gerard and his traps were in the dog-cart that had been sent to meet him, and on the road to Bellmoor Lodge.

CHAPTER XXIV.

RETROSPECTIVE.

It has often been remarked—and by some, moreover, who may be considered as fairly qualified to express an opinion on the subject—that there is no direct advantage in telling a lie when the object desired may be as readily attained by speaking the truth. Similarly, we hold that the cordial relations which ought to exist between author and reader are not likely to be in any way enhanced by the keeping up of a mystery when there is no necessity for so doing. And as the main thread of our narrative is in no way affected by the previous history of George Morton, we think that it may be just as well to take our readers into our confidence at once, and enlighten them as to the motives, without some explanation of which that gentleman's conduct, as described in the preceding chapter and elsewhere, might appear somewhat unaccountable.

We will, then, crave indulgence for a moment's delay in the course of our story, and take a retrospective glance at a little episode in George Morton's life which occurred some five or six years before his first introduction to them in connection with Gerard Courtenay.

The scene is an old-fashioned rectory garden in one of the south-western counties. A trim lawn slopes down to a pretty trout-stream, which a hundred yards higher up ripples lazily over gravelly shallows, where in the heat of the day the cattle may be heard splashing about up to their knees in the cool water, but is here confined in a narrower and deeper channel between moss-grown old brick walls, and flows on in a steady, business-like current under the dark shadow of a grey old wooden bridge, towards the mill-dam on the left, where, behind a luxuriant cluster of evergreens, the white-washed gables and red-tiled roof of the mill stand up against the clear blue sky. On the right is a shrubbery reaching down to the water, backed by a cluster of elms, where a colony of rooks are holding a noisy conclave. Behind is the rectory house,

a low, two-storied stone building, the sober colouring of which is relieved by a bright band of flower-beds stretching along the entire front; while above all rises the grey church tower, round which the jackdaws are doing their best to emulate the clamour of the rooks in the adjoining elms.

It is a lovely morning in June; and even at this early hour—for the clock in the old church tower has only just struck seven—both house and garden are bathed in a flood of brilliant sunshine. There is as yet little sign of life indoors, and the blinds are still down in most of the windows. Early as is the hour, however, it does not appear to be thought unseasonable by two persons who are strolling along the little gravel walk by the stream, and apparently engrossed in a most interesting conversation. As the clock strikes, one of them, a tall, good-looking young man of about five-and-twenty, utters an exclamation of impatience and regret, and pulls out his watch as if to dispute the time with the church. They are now at the end of the wall by the little bridge, and screened from observation by a mass of evergreens. He

turns about abruptly, and stands face to face with his companion.

It is not, indeed, wonderful that he should be loth to quit the society in which he finds himself; for a fairer specimen of an English girl than Constance Molyneux it would at that time have been difficult to find. She was considerably above the middle height, and had a way of holding her head that made her appear still taller. But, tall as she was, it would have been a fastidious critic who could have found fault with the lines of her graceful undulating figure, while the well-shaped, queenly little head and full, rounded throat would have afforded a model for a sculptor. The mouth was perhaps a trifle too large for strict beauty, but it was easy to overlook such a trifling defect, if indeed it could be called such, when combined with the loveliest violet eyes imaginable, and with a freshness and delicacy of colouring that it would have been difficult to surpass. As she stands there, this June morning, in a simple white muslin dress, just relieved by a crimson rose-bud, and an old straw hat stuck carelessly on a mass of dark-brown hair, one or two little rebellious

locks of which have straggled down on to her fair forehead, she is a bright and sunny picture —such a picture indeed of youth and freshness, as yet unsullied by the sorrows and disappointments of the world, as it does one good to look upon.

"I must be off, I suppose," says her companion, with a sigh; "one must allow three-quarters of an hour to catch the train, and that old fly-horse doesn't look as if he would care much about being hurried."

"Yes, I suppose you ought to be going," she replies, with just the slightest possible change of colour; "I hope you will have a pleasant journey, and you must let us hear of you again some day."

"Ah, Constance," he exclaims, "will you care to hear about me, I wonder?" and he seizes her hand in both of his.

"Well, perhaps I may," she replies, with a lovely blush, but drawing her hand gently away. "Now, you must really be off. What will papa say when he hears I got up to see you off like this?"

"Won't you give me that rose," he pleads, regardless of papa's problematical displeasure,

"just as a remembrance of this morning? not that I require anything to remind me of you, you know, but still"——

She takes the rose-bud slowly from her breast, but hesitates a moment before giving it him. "There, take it, and be off," she at length says, hurriedly. One more pressure of the hand, and in another moment he has disappeared behind the evergreens.

All very pretty and romantic, no doubt, we fancy we hear the reader say. Young man staying at rectory—falls in love with rector's pretty daughter—love marriage and all the rest of it.

Such, unquestionably, would be the natural and orthodox sequel to this little summer idyl. As, however, things in this world do not invariably turn out exactly as we consider that we have a right to expect, we must ask our readers to imagine that a period of eighteen months has elapsed, and once again take a glance at the rectory garden.

It is a chill afternoon in December. The old house looks damp and cheerless, and a bleak wintry wind is moaning through the bare branches of the elms, and whisking the

dead leaves across the sodden lawn. Heavy rains have swollen and discoloured the little stream, which has here and there overflowed its boundaries and formed standing pools on the gravel walk. An occasional shuddering gust of wind sweeps across the dull, leaden water, now almost up to the floor of the wooden bridge; and a water-rat, essaying to cross to a hole on the other side, finds it as much as he can do to make headway against the current. Everything, in fact, looks gloomy and depressing, and suggestive of the rapidly waning year.

At the corner by the bridge two persons are standing, whom it is not difficult to recognise as the same from whom we parted at the same spot that lovely morning in June. But eighteen months have wrought a sad change in one of them. The brilliant colouring has departed; the face looks pale and thin; and there are dark circles round those violet eyes that speak unmistakably of care and sorrow. Nothing could ever make Constance Molyneux appear otherwise than graceful and highbred; but even that slim, lissome figure has now a drooping look

about it; and as she draws her waterproof cloak more closely round her to protect her dress from a shower of moisture that a gust of wind has driven off the evergreens, it is painfully evident that she is not the same bright creature who stood there in the June sunshine only a short eighteen months ago.

The lapse of time does not appear to have much affected her companion. He is young and comely as ever; and there are no traces of care or anxiety about his handsome face. But there is a look upon it that it is not altogether pleasant to see—a look of shame contending with selfishness, in a struggle where selfishness has obtained the mastery. His head is bent down, and he is boring little holes with his stick in the damp gravel. His general demeanour is, in fact, very different from what it was that bright morning in June, and the contrast is hardly to his advantage.

The last time we saw them here, they had plenty to say to each other. Now, however, the conversation seems to flag, and they are both apparently oppressed by a feeling of restraint and uneasiness. At last, however, she speaks.

"I suppose we shall not see anything more of you at present?" she says, in a voice that is intended to be unconcerned, but in which it is possible to detect a slight tremor.

"No; I'm afraid not," he replies. "I don't know exactly how long I shall be away; but I don't expect to be home again much before this time next year."

His voice, too, is somewhat constrained and unnatural, though he affects an appearance of indifference. The situation is, in fact, very far from being comfortable, and it is evident that the relations of the parties towards each other have become just a little strained.

There is another uncomfortable pause, which, however, is interrupted by the striking of the old church clock. Miss Molyneux draws her waterproof round her with a slight shiver, and looks her companion steadily in the face.

"You are going by the four o'clock train, are you not?" she says; "you must not let me keep you here."

He, too, looks up in her face for a moment, but, somehow or other, is unable to meet the glance of those sweet violet eyes, that seem to

look through and through him. "Yes, I must be off," he replies in a sort of half-defiant, half-desperate tone; and then, as if still inclined to linger, "I'm so sorry not to have seen your father. I do hope he will get all right again soon."

"Thanks," she answers coldly; "I am afraid he won't be about again for a long time yet. But you mustn't lose your train; don't you think you ought to be going?" and she holds out her hand, as if to wish him good-bye.

He takes it in his, but still lingers on, though he dares not look in her face again. "Good-bye," at length he says, in a hoarse whisper, and, with one last pressure of her hand, he is gone, and she is once more standing there alone.

"Well," the reader will very likely say, "there is nothing very remarkable in all this. They have had a quarrel perhaps, and will of course make it up again; but surely there is nothing to make a fuss about."

No; it is nothing to make a fuss about, perhaps, and it represents a by no means unusual occurrence in everyday life. It can hardly be described as a quarrel, however. It

is simply this, that the gentleman has changed his mind, while the lady, curiously enough, remains the same.

So George Morton went on his way, and, Constance Molyneux remained at the old rectory, to think over the past and nurse her father, who had been in failing health for some months past. He was an old man, and had held the living of Under Newton for nearly forty years; but until lately had been hale and vigorous as any man of his age in the parish. He had caught a chill, however, during the preceding summer, which, through being neglected, had resulted in congestion of the lungs; and though he had in a certain measure recovered, he had never regained his strength, and there were threatenings of other complications of a still more serious nature. In the mean time he was entirely confined to his room, and the affairs of the parish were left in the hands of his curate. It had been a sad time, therefore, for Constance, his only child, who had long had the cares of their small household upon her, and who was now burdened with the additional charge of a sick father.

Miss Molyneux had led a quiet and uneventful life at the old rectory till within the last two years. Her mother had died when she was quite a child, and it had never occurred to her father, a man of a stay-at-home and indolent disposition, that it was either necessary or desirable for his daughter to see more of the world than was to be found in the neighbourhood of Under Newton. And a quieter corner of England it would have been difficult to imagine. It was a thinly populated district, with few resident gentry, and the nearest town of any importance a good fifteen miles away; and though of late years a branch railway had been opened which had brought Under Newton within five miles of a little roadside station, no great impetus appeared to have been thereby given either to social or commercial interests. Society, in fact, according to modern ideas, there was none, and most persons who should be called upon to pass their days at Under Newton would have considered themselves as to all intents and purposes shut out from the world. But even in this out-of-the-way corner of the kingdom there were one or two houses here and

there whose owners, when at home, endeavoured manfully to do their duty to society as far as in them lay; and it was at a lawn-tennis party at one of these, where George Morton happened to be staying, that he first met Constance Molyneux. It was not wonderful, perhaps, that he should have been attracted by her; and it was not long before he was introduced to her father, and obtained a footing in her home. People in these out-of-the-way parts of the country are generally somewhat unsophisticated, and given to hospitality in regard to chance visitors. George Morton soon found out that there was good trout-fishing to be had near Under Newton; and although he took up his quarters in the most innocent manner at the village inn, it was only natural that after a few days they should be transferred to the rectory. And after this, the result was only what might have been expected.

And yet there had been no positive engagement, no plighted vows—nothing, in fact, that in a lower grade of life could have been worked up into a case for breach of promise. But every one knew that Constance Molyneux

had been jilted, and she herself knew only too well that she had given away her heart, and had got nothing in return.

Misfortunes seldom, if ever, come alone. The old rector, whose strength had been gradually declining, became rapidly worse, and before the new year he was lying in the churchyard. George Morton was by this time far away from England, and remained in ignorance of the old man's death. The next intelligence he received of Constance Molyneux was the announcement, which he happened to see in an English paper at San Francisco some six months later, of her marriage to Augustus Caledon, Esq., of H.B.M. Consular Service.

Morton's first, and not very unnatural reflection, was that the lady had not lost much time in consoling herself. It was not the first time he had heard of Mr Caledon, who, like himself, had been staying in that part of the country, and whom the same attraction had drawn to the rectory. It had been evident to every one that he, too, had admired Miss Molyneux; but George Morton, in the pride of five-and-twenty, had never looked upon a man of fifty or thereabouts as a serious rival,

and had not even contemplated the possibility of his being accepted as a suitor. The news was therefore something of a shock to him, especially as during the last month or so his thoughts had in the most unaccountable manner again reverted to the love which he had taught himself to look upon as an idle fancy, and of which he had long since thought himself entirely cured. Human nature is, however, proverbially inconsistent; and it was not, perhaps, to be wondered at that George Morton, who had certainly for the moment been very much in love with Constance Molyneux, more, perhaps, than he had any idea of, should have experienced a kind of reaction when he found that she had altogether passed away from him, and that the old feeling should have returned upon him with tenfold power. He tried to persuade himself that it was all for the best, and that her proceedings could no longer be a matter of any possible interest to him. But, somehow or other, he could not get her out of his head, and he began to detest Augustus Caledon, Esq., of H.B.M. Consular Service, with all his heart.

Without going further into the history of George Morton's resuscitated affection, it will be sufficient to say that, within a month of his seeing the announcement of Constance's marriage, he was more in love with her than ever, and, alas! with that hopeless, desperate passion that, when once it has entered into a man's heart, leaves little room for anything else. He was travelling with a friend at the time, and had some thoughts of turning his face towards England, but, after this intelligence, the idea of coming home seemed hateful to him, and he was easily persuaded to accompany his friend on a further expedition likely to last some months longer. He returned home at last, cured, as he thought, and with the determination to dismiss Constance for ever from his thoughts. But it was not long before some trifling incident brought everything back to him, and within two months of his return he was in a worse state than ever.

So things went on with Morton for about a year, during which time he was subject to alternations of the deepest depression and self-reproach, and of a sort of listlessness that, while

to all appearance it did not prevent his going on much as usual, seemed to take all the brightness out of his life, and to render him indifferent to almost everything that went on around him. He had heard nothing whatever of Constance, and had not even attempted to learn any news of her. But he was roused one day from this state of apathy by another newspaper announcement of a nature that he had little anticipated. Once more his eye was caught by a name that was now painfully familiar to him, and with dizzy brain and a scarcely beating heart he read of the sudden death of Augustus Caledon, Esq., H.B.M. Consul at Augsburg, aged fifty-three.

His first impulse was to rush off to Augsburg at once, and throw himself at her feet. Then he reflected that such a proceeding on his part would seem to her utterly unreasonable and inconsistent, and that if, as he had every reason to suppose, she had got over any feelings of affection she might once have had for him, it would hardly be the way most calculated to win them back. No, he must allow a certain time to elapse, and then approach her by degrees. But the mere fact

of her being once more free, in a manner too that he never dared to think of or hope for, seemed to give him new life, and he set himself to wait as patiently as he could till such time as he felt he could with ordinary decency venture to bring himself once more to her notice.

It would not seem a very difficult task, at the present day, to follow or trace out the movements of a person who has occupied a tolerably prominent position in a minor Continental town. Morton never had the smallest doubt of being able to find out Mrs Caledon whenever the proper moment should arrive, by the simple process of making inquiries at Augsburg, whence, supposing she had left the place after her husband's death, it would be easy to trace her to wherever she might have retired. In this theory he was supported by a friend at the International Office, who assured him that there would be no trouble whatever about it, and undertook to make confidential inquiries through the acting consul. It was with some surprise, therefore, not to say perturbation, that Morton was informed by his friend, some ten

days later, that Mrs Caledon had left Augsburg the day after her husband's funeral, accompanied only by her own maid, and leaving behind her neither address nor indeed any trace whatever. The other servants had been paid off and dismissed; and no one in Augsburg had the slightest idea what had become of her, beyond the bare fact that she had left by a certain train going in the direction of Frankfort.

This intelligence was by no means encouraging; but Morton endeavoured to console himself by the reflection that it was impossible that she should have left absolutely no trace behind her, and that it only required the presence of some one really in earnest to hit off the scent. He was beginning to get restless and impatient beyond endurance; so without more ado he put himself into the train, and went straight to Augsburg, determined to investigate matters thoroughly for himself. But he soon found to his dismay that his diplomatic friend had been perfectly right, and that Mrs Caledon had vanished without leaving the very slightest trace behind her. So well concealed, indeed, had

been her movements, that it seemed evident that an intentional secrecy had been observed. He succeeded in ascertaining that a lady answering to her description had taken tickets for Paris; but this was in itself too slender a thread of evidence to constitute a clue of any importance; and after three or four days spent in fruitless inquiries, he returned to England no wiser than when he started.

It would be too tedious to follow George Morton through all his experiences in search of his lost love. But at the end of six months, during which time he had, as he thought, exhausted every conceivable means of getting on her track, he was as ignorant of her whereabouts as ever. It is true that he had not much to go upon; for the only other place besides Augsburg where he could reasonably hope for a clue was her old home at Under Newton. But here his researches resulted in an absolute blank. It appeared that Miss Molyneux had left almost directly after her father's death; his successor was entirely unacquainted with her; and the most that could be gathered from the natives of the village was that she had written to one or two old

people with whom she had been particularly intimate, to announce her marriage and the fact that she was about to go abroad. Since then, nothing had been heard about her; and there was absolutely nothing therefore upon which to found an inquiry.

It is extremely probable that if Morton had placed the affair in the hands of a private detective, it would not have been long before some clue had been obtained of Mrs Caledon's whereabouts. But he could not quite bring himself to resort to such an expedient. Conscious, all too late, of having behaved very badly to her, he shrank instinctively from taking a step that, if discovered, she might justly resent as an unwarrantable impertinence; and determined, though with a despairing heart, that, if she was to be found, it must be by his own individual exertions. Once or twice, indeed, he fancied that he had come upon her track; but his hopes were on each occasion doomed to disappointment, and after each failure he became more despondent than ever. It was on one of these occasions that, sick and weary of his desultory existence, he suddenly resolved to endeavour to

escape from himself and the bitter contemplation of the past by embarking in some occupation that would demand hard and continuous labour, both mental and physical. His engineering education here stood him in good stead. He obtained through a friend an introduction to a director of one of the leading northern lines; was passed on by him to the locomotive superintendent, and having proved satisfactorily that he possessed a competent knowledge of the most important details of engine-work, was taken on as a fireman, from which humble position he was soon raised to that of an extra driver. And this is how Gerard Courtenay ran up against him at Long Heaton Junction.

CHAPTER XXV.

"THERE WAS NO DOUBT ABOUT IT?"

"LORD BALLYBRACK, will you take Lady Adelaide? Colonel Scott, will you take Miss Sartoris? I'm so sorry I've no young lady for you, Gerard; but come and sit by me, and tell me all about yourself." And having thus spoken, the Countess of Mount Easton gave her arm to the Earl of Narborough, and rustled after her guests into the dining-room.

Bellmoor Lodge was not a large house, and incapable therefore of accommodating any great number of visitors, especially if all the younger members of the family happened to be at home. There was nominally room for three married couples, and when the boys were at school, for four or five bachelor guests, one of whom might possibly be called upon to sleep in a bathroom, which had been fitted up to do duty as a bedroom at a pinch. The house had originally, as its name implied,

been only a shooting-lodge, but had by degrees been added and added to until it had attained its present dimensions. The fine air and general healthiness of the locality had caused it to be selected from among the numerous residences of the Marquis of St. Ives as the abode of the Mount Eastons and their youthful family; and there was a talk every year of adding a new wing, or otherwise enlarging the house. But somehow or other the projected operations never came off, and it remained an ugly, inconvenient, and yet thoroughly homelike and lovable old house, to which all members of the family were much attached.

At the present moment the house was as full as it could hold, even down to the bath-room, which had been assigned to Gerard, and which was in reality far more comfortable than its designation implied, having been converted by fresh chintzes, a luxurious arm-chair, and other minor appliances, into what was in fact an ordinary bedroom, with the addition of a huge fixed bath. The fire-place was certainly somewhat peculiar, having been originally a closed stove, and designed more

for utility than ornament; but it gave out plenty of heat, which was the great point after all; and a wearied sportsman, returning after a long tramp over the hills or a day's covert-shooting along the steep wooded banks of the Bell or Beil Water, is not as a rule disposed to criticise the design of the fireplace in his bedroom, as long as the fire itself is bright and cheerful.

The party consisted of Lord and Lady Narborough, and Lady Adelaide, Lord Narborough's sister, whom we have met before; our old friend the "Cadger;" Colonel Scott of Newlands Castle, about fifteen miles distant; Miss Sartoris, a connection of the family; a guardsman cousin of Lady Mount Easton's; a sailor brother of his lordship's; and our hero.

The Earl of Narborough was a stout, estimable young man of about five-and-thirty, though in appearance and manner he might have passed for some years older. He was one of those persons respecting whom, though blameless to the last degree in the position to which they have been called, it is impossible not to wonder how it is that Providence has

not assigned them some other walk in life. He would have made a fair curate or a tolerable missionary, and had destiny and his own inclinations so willed it, he was by no means destitute of such talents as, combined with a tractable disposition and regular habits, might have enabled him to attain a respectable position in the Civil Service. But a casual observer, meeting him in mixed society, would never for a moment have supposed that he was the head of a noble and ancient family, and the tenant for life of one of the finest properties in the south of England. His outward appearance was certainly not in his favour, for he was somewhat below middle height, with a decided tendency to corpulence, and although his features were good and his expression not unpleasant, his movements were awkward and ungainly, and it was seldom that he really appeared at his ease. Add to this a self-conscious, nervous, and rather peevish manner, with a tendency to stammer, and it will readily be understood that the tenth Earl of Narborough did not altogether come up to the generally accepted definition of a popular man. And yet it must

be confessed, that whatever faults he had were chiefly external and superficial, for a more well-intentioned and conscientious creature never existed.

But however small an opinion the world might have of the social qualities of the noble earl, there was but one opinion as to the lady whom he had been so fortunate as to secure as his wife. Sensible, good-natured, gifted with a keen sense of humour, and at the same time an inexhaustible fund of patience and a happy disposition that never seemed ruffled by her husband's little caprices and weaknesses, she managed him as probably very few others could have done; and those who had known him before his marriage were compelled to admit that he had very much improved since. It had in fact been a matter of some speculation whether his lordship would ever marry, for from the time of his coming of age he had been deeply impressed with the idea that he was the one central object of attraction to the mothers of England, and that every young lady he met had matrimonial designs upon him. It is quite probable that his apprehensions on this subject were in many cases far from

groundless; but at the same time, and although unquestionably a first-class *parti*, he was not, as he appeared to think, the only rich young heir to a peerage in the matrimonial market; and after three or four seasons, during which the attractions of various eligible young ladies had been in vain paraded before him, it began to be said that he was not likely to marry; and one or two mammas had even been heard to declare that nothing should induce them to allow their darlings to risk their happiness with such a man. It is within the limits of possibility that these good ladies might have already tried their hands on his lordship without success; but be this as it may, he began to be looked upon as of little account; and his own tastes not leading him much into society, the danger into which he imagined himself to be perpetually exposed became less and less every year. At the same time, his apprehensions on this score were not in any way diminished, and nothing in the world would have induced him to remain alone in a room for five minutes with any young person who by any stretch of imagination could have been considered as a possible candidate for the honour of a matri-

monial alliance. So time rolled on, till one day some astonishment was created in fashionable circles by the announcement of his engagement to Miss Brabazon, the eldest daughter of a west-country baronet, with a limited rent-roll and a large family, who had scarcely ever been seen in London, and whose name had never been connected with his lordship's in any way.

This intelligence may have caused certain mothers to regret that they had not followed up the pursuit of the noble earl a little closer; and much speculation was for the moment excited as to the nature of the circumstances which could have induced him to make up his mind to propose. Public interest in the matter, however, soon died out; and Lord Easthampton, as he then was, and his wife very soon settled down into a respectable and domestic country couple, only appearing in London on rare occasions, and of very little account in the fashionable world. They had now been married about five years, in the course of which time his lordship had succeeded to the family honours, and having been presented with two girls, his mind, which had hitherto been much exercised on

the subject, had at length been relieved by the appearance of a son and heir.

The shooting at Bellmoor, though not affording the opportunities for slaughter which are considered by many modern sportsmen a *sine quâ non*, was very good of its kind, and especially enjoyable by reason of the nature of the ground and the lovely scenery; and as Gerard settled himself comfortably before the fire after his first day's sport, and prepared for half an hour's doze before dressing for dinner, he felt as if the world were not such a very bad place after all. He had had a very pleasant day, and was just comfortably tired; the change of air and exercise had already done him good; and he always felt more or less happy when in the company of Lady Mount Easton. Then there was his other cousin, too, or reputed cousin, Adelaide Middleton, who was always very nice, and whom he was glad to see again; and that Miss Sartoris seemed a good sort of girl too. Altogether, our friend Gerard felt somehow that as far as present and external circumstances went he had not much to complain of; and although the thought of his far-away love

and of the uncertainty and hoplessness that seemed to surround his prospects was ever present to him, and would at times absorb everything else, the elasticity of youth, and a naturally buoyant and happy disposition, enabled him to cast his cares to a great extent on one side, and to forget for the time all thought of the future in the enjoyment of the present.

"Rum fellow Narborough," observed the "Cadger," as he seated himself in an arm-chair in the smoking-room that evening. It is hardly necessary to observe that the nobleman thus referred to was not present, one of his little peculiarities being a rooted aversion to tobacco in any shape or form. "D——d dangerous shot too," he continued; "shot at a rabbit right between us, and the shot came all round me. Ain't sure he didn't hit me, by Gad," feeling tenderly down one leg, "or else it's a d——d big thorn."

"By Jove, you don't say so!" exclaimed Lord Mount Easton, lighting a cigar at the fire. "I say, let's undress the old Cadger, and see if he's really been hit. We'll soon pick it out, old chap; here's a knife with a

pair of tweezers in it; or if that won't do, we'll try a corkscrew."

This proposal was received with acclamation by all except the individual immediately concerned, who showed no signs of a desire to be operated upon in the manner suggested; and after the pretence of a scuffle with Lord Mount Easton, who approached with a knife in one hand and a corkscrew in the other, the party settled down comfortably in various attitudes of repose, and smoking soon became general.

"Hang it all, though," observed Mount Easton, more seriously, "I'm afraid he is rather dangerous. He don't seem particular where he points his gun, and I'll take my oath he let it off once by accident. He pretended he was shooting at a rabbit in some thick stuff, but I was near him, and I'll swear he never got his gun up to his shoulder. However, we'll put him well on the left tomorrow, and keep him there; and if he shoots you again, Cadger, old boy, why, just you let him have it back, you know."

"Oh, yes, that's all devilish fine," responded the "Cadger," gloomily. "I wish he'd stay

at home, though. What the deuce can he want to go out shooting for? He can't hit a haystack, and he don't seem much of a hand at walking either. He's a rum beggar altogether; can't say I care much about him."

"Oh, he's not half a bad chap, really, when you get to know him," said Mount Easton. "He always was a muff, you know, and never could do anything like any one else; but he's a good-hearted sort of fellow, and he isn't half such a fool as he looks, I can tell you."

"Well, that's devilish lucky," broke in the guardsman, "for he's one of the stupidest fellows to look at I ever saw. But isn't there something odd in the family? Father was a rum un too, wasn't he?"

"No, no, my dear Bill," said Mount Easton; "why, his father was a dear old boy,—best fellow in the world, though a bit pig-headed. Used to pitch into this chap like anything for being such a muff. Awful pity he's dead; and he wasn't really an old man, either. No; you're thinking of his uncle, whom his father succeeded; he was rather off his head, I

believe, and came to an end in some extraordinary way."

"Ah, well," interposed the veteran Colonel Scott, who had not as yet taken any part in the conversation, "I'm not so sure about that either. Of course it was long before the time of any of you; but I remember him very well, and he was just as fine a young fellow as ever lived. It was a most extraordinary case, but I don't believe that there was really anything wrong with him. He had simply got it into his head that he would improve himself and all that sort of thing by seeing the world as a working man, and I've no doubt whatever," knocking the ashes off his cigar, "that if only he had lived, poor fellow, he would have had something to show for it. Your father was a great friend of his, I recollect," turning to Gerard, "and I've no doubt you have heard him speak of him."

"What happened to him, then?" inquired the "Cadger," sleepily. "Oh, ah, by the way, I remember now. Blown up in one of those d——d river steamers in America, wasn't he?"

"No," replied Colonel Scott; "he wasn't

exactly blown up, but he got scalded by an escape of steam or something, and died two or three days afterwards. He was working as a common sailor, or boatman, or something of that kind, at the time, and you can imagine the excitement over there when they found out who he was."

"I suppose there was no doubt about it, was there?" inquired Mount Easton. "I mean, that it really was him who was killed. I fancy I've heard people say that the evidence was supposed to be a bit doubtful, and that there was some danger of a claimant turning up, or something of the kind."

"Oh, no," replied the Colonel, "I fancy it was all clear enough. There was only one of the law lords, or whoever they were, who had to decide, who had any doubt about it, and that was only old Brentford, who never would agree with anybody. Besides, it's over forty years ago now, and if there had been a claimant to come forward, we should have heard about it long ago."

"Ah, well," observed Mount Easton, "I wish this chap's father had lived. Why, he wasn't much over sixty when he died, though

he looked older. It was that fall that did it; he was always fooling about with young horses, and thought he could break them himself, and one day he got rolled over and regularly smashed up."

"Well, this sportsman won't kill himself that way, anyhow," remarked the guardsman; "he never gets outside a horse by any chance, does he?"

"No, I fancy not," replied Mount Easton, helping himself to some whisky and potash-water. "Well, you fellows, I'm going to bed; and mind, breakfast at eight sharp to-morrow. Cadger, you'd better go to bed too, or you won't be up in time." So his lordship disappeared, and the party shortly afterwards broke up, and retired to their well-earned repose.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"WHERE DID YOU GET THAT BROOCH?"

THE next day's shooting was near the house, and the sportsmen, on their return, found themselves with a couple of hours to spare before dinner. There was accordingly a general gathering in the library, and a considerable run upon the tea-table and its accompaniments. There is no time, by the way, when male society is, to all appearances, more welcome to the fair sex than the hour of afternoon tea. Perhaps it is that the ladies have by this time had enough of each other's society, and the usual feminine topics of discussion have been completely exhausted. Or possibly our fair enslavers may be thoroughly aware of the fact that there is no moment when they appear more charming in the eyes of their admirers than when the latter have just returned, wet and tired, from the pursuit of some out-door sport. The sudden transition

from a cold, stormy night out-of-doors to the warmth and luxury of a lady's boudoir certainly affords about as great a contrast as could well be imagined; and the ministering angel who offers you a cup of tea, appears, under such circumstances, to be very few degrees removed from a *houri* of paradise.

Be this as it may, however, there was a very cheery party in the library at Bellmoor that evening, and a good deal of pleasant chaff and repartee was flying about. The "Cadger," although undoubtedly a "parti" as far as his position and title went, whatever doubts might have been entertained as to the resources of the Ballybrack property, was not generally looked upon as a marrying man, and had in fact begun to be regarded in many quarters as an incurable bachelor. But he was always popular with women, whether actuated by matrimonial designs upon him or not, and his good-natured and easy-going disposition made up for other little shortcomings. On the present occasion he was in great force, being, as he himself expressed it, a "nailer" at tea and bread-and-butter, with which refresh-

ments he was being assiduously supplied by Lady Adelaide and Miss Sartoris, to both of whom he was pretending to make desperate love, without, however, conveying any very strong impression of the sincerity of his professions. That excellent young nobleman, the Earl of Narborough, was holding forth at length to Lady Mount Easton, a cup of tea in one hand and a piece of cake in the other, upon the merits of a certain specific for indigestion, for the discovery or at least the adaptation of which he took credit to himself. The subject was doubtless most interesting; but it required a certain amount of self-control on the part of his charming hostess to keep up the appearance of interest and gravity with which his lordship evidently considered that the question ought to be discussed; and sundry side glances at Lady Adelaide might have suggested to any one else that she was becoming a little bored. The rest of the party were scattered about in the vicinity of the tea-table; and an air of extreme snugness and sociability pervaded everything.

By degrees, however, the party began to break up. Lord Narborough, having eaten

considerably more cake than was good for him, informed Lady Mount Easton, with an air that was intended to be impressive, that he had some rather important letters to write before dinner, and feared therefore that he must withdraw; an announcement which, we regret to state, did not appear to produce any great effect either upon his hostess or the company in general. The other men gradually sneaked off, with the idea of a quiet cigar before dressing; the ladies began to wonder what o'clock it was, and show signs of moving; and Gerard, who, having a rough turn for drawing, had been for the last quarter of an hour busily engaged upon a work of art designed for the amusement of Lady Mount Easton's little girl, suddenly found himself, on looking up, alone with Lady Adelaide, who was apparently too much engrossed in some elaborate bead-work to move just yet.

"Hollo, why, they're all gone!" exclaimed Gerard; "it isn't time to dress yet, surely?"

"All, indeed!" echoed Lady Adelaide, without looking up from her work; "you're a nice young man to talk like that while I'm

still here. Bother these beads! I wish I was a man, and could swear at them; it would do me such a lot of good."

"Well, don't mind me," said Gerard, "swear away as much as you like, Adelaide; you may be sure I won't tell any one. Can't I help you?" and he shut up his drawing, and came over to the sofa where she was sitting, her head bent gracefully over a little table whereon lay the offending beads in question.

We have already intimated that Gerard and his *soi-disant* cousin were on very friendly terms, and that, when nothing more eligible presented itself, Lady Adelaide, who, it must be confessed, was rather more addicted to flirtation than some of her friends altogether approved of, had no objection to keeping her hand in by a little harmless practice with our hero. It had in fact come to be almost an understood thing that he should always be very devoted to her, though it was equally well understood on both sides that his devotion should never go beyond a certain point. And we are bound to admit that our friend Gerard had by no means shown himself back-

ward in taking advantage of whatever latitude his fair relative might be disposed to allow him, and that divers little cousinly familiarities had occasionally passed between them, especially when they were both some years younger.

"No, you can't," she replied, "you're much too clumsy. Your fingers are all thumbs, I know; men's always are: besides, I don't think I've got enough of these beastly beads to go on with, so I shall give it up for to-night."

"Well, you're looking awfully nice, anyhow," was Gerard's somewhat inconsequent rejoinder. "I say, Adelaide, old Ballybrack's awfully spooney on you. How should you like to be Lady Ballybrack? It's rather a nice place, isn't it? anyhow, there's lots of hunting, as it's in the middle of the Rathmore country, and you could ask me to come and stay with you, you know."

"Rubbish!" was the young lady's reply; "I'd just as soon marry you. Do you suppose I'd go and bury myself in a place like that in order to be Mrs Cadger? No, hardly good enough, I think. Now, get out of the way, I'm going up to dress."

"Oh, don't go away," pleaded Gerard, lazily. "There's three quarters of an hour yet, and this sofa's so jolly comfortable."

"Well, that's more than your arm is, I can tell you. Take it away at once, sir; I won't have any nonsense. There now, you've gone and scratched yourself, you stupid boy, and serve you quite right, too. Well, what are you staring at now?"

"I was looking at that brooch of yours, Adelaide," replied Gerard, in a somewhat altered voice. "I hadn't noticed it before; where did you get it?"

"Get it?" she replied; "why, it's been in the family for ages. It belonged to Mary Queen of Scots, and there was a cross just like it, which I ought to have too; but it disappeared some time ago, mamma says, and I suppose it was stolen."

"Well, it's very odd," said Gerard, with a sigh, his thoughts wandering away from Lady Adelaide to an entirely different person; "it's very odd, but I could have sworn I had seen that cross you speak of, and that's what made me ask you. It's such a curious pattern," he continued, looking hard at the brooch,

which held together a lace arrangement of some sort round Lady Adelaide's pretty neck, "and the cross I saw belonged to Queen Mary too, at least so they said—I mean I was told so. It was a girl I met at a ball in Wealdshire, down near Sydmonton, you know," endeavouring to harden his voice and speak unconcernedly, but failing signally in the attempt, "and she had a cross just exactly like that."

"Oh, yes, I understand," interrupted Lady Adelaide, seeing through him in a moment, and perhaps not particularly well pleased; "well, you may tell your friend, with my compliments, next time you see her, that it's my opinion she stole it. Goodness! there's the gong, and I've got a new dress to put on. What a fool I've been to waste all this time here with you!" And her ladyship was decidedly "short" with Gerard for the rest of that evening.

As for our hero himself, the little episode of the brooch had set him thinking, sadly enough, of his far-away love, and of his apparently hopeless position as regarded her. It was very curious, too, about that cross, which he

remembered only too well. Of course it could not possibly be the same that Lady Adelaide had spoken of as having been in the Narborough family; but it certainly was odd that there should be two crosses of that peculiar workmanship, both of which were said to have originally belonged to the same person. However, this was only a detail, and not worth thinking about; but it all recalled vividly to his mind the events of those ten days at Shawfield, which seemed to stand out as a landmark in his life, and it seemed to him somehow as if even his chronic and harmless flirtation with Lady Adelaide, which had gone on ever since he could remember, were a breach of faith towards her whom he felt that he loved above every one and everything in the world. And yet, alas! what grounds had he for supposing that she cared two straws about his flirting with Lady Adelaide or any one else? It was all very wretched and unsatisfactory, he knew that; and he went to dress with rather a heavy heart.

A good dinner, however, following on a good day's sport, is not without its soothing effects, even in the case of a gentleman in love; and

the social atmosphere at Bellmoor was too cheerful to allow of any great depression of spirits. Before going to bed, therefore, Gerard felt better again, and inclined to take a more philosophical view of his prospects. He felt as if it would do him good to confide his troubles to Lady Mount Easton; but the opportunity did not present itself until the day before his departure, when, being a Sunday afternoon, and most of the other guests having departed the previous day, he had accompanied her in a walk to the house of an old retainer about a couple of miles away.

Women are very quick to find out when a man is in love, and Lady Mount Easton had not failed to notice that there was something amiss with Gerard, which she was not slow in attributing to its true cause; and being really fond of and interested in him, she felt some desire to know more about it, and had, in fact, determined to invite his confidence. So, having accomplished her visit, and proposed a slight *détour* on the road home, she approached the subject with a tact and delicacy which few knew better how to exercise.

"So glad to have had you here, Jerry," she

began, "and that you've had a little shooting. It's so fortunate, too, that you've had such fine weather; that makes such a difference in this wild country."

"Oh, Lily," he replied, "I've enjoyed it immensely. We've really had capital sport, especially considering that it's the end of the season. But you know I always enjoy being here, apart from the shooting or anything of that sort."

"Yes, I think it seems to have done you good," she said, with a side glance at his face; "I didn't think you were looking very well when you came, but you're looking much better now. I fancied you looked as if you had been working too hard, or perhaps," she added, in the most innocent manner possible, "as if you had had something to bother you."

This was an invitation to confidence which, coming from such a quarter, it would have required some strength of mind to resist, and which our friend was certainly not proof against. He was silent for a moment, then stammered out a few incoherent remarks as to there being nothing particular, and then came out with it all.

"Well, Lily," he said, "as you've asked me, I don't mind telling you that I have been rather bothered about something, and if it won't bore you, I'll tell you all about it." And he told her the whole story: how he had first seen Miss Graham on the Southdowns, but had thought no more about her till he met her again at the Shawfield ball; and how he had eventually been unable to restrain himself from proposing to her. "You'll think me a great fool, Lily, I'm sure," he continued, "but I couldn't help it, and I'm in earnest about it, I can tell you, if only I knew what to do."

"Dear Jerry," was the reply, "it's most interesting to me, I assure you; and I'm so glad you've told me. Do you know, I fancied there was something of this sort, for you seemed so unlike yourself. I am sure she must be nice, Jerry, from what you say. But it seems to me, you know, that—well, that you have been just a little precipitate. You say she lives with this Mr Baldwin; is she any relation, or is he her guardian, or what?"

"Well, that's just the odd part of it," replied Gerard, with a sigh. "It's a most extraordinary thing; but no one seemed to know

anything about her—I mean to say, who she was; though every one seemed to think it quite natural that she should be living there. Lady Sydmonton told me that she fancied she was the daughter of an old friend of his who was dead, and that he had adopted her as his daughter, or something of that sort. I asked two or three other people, and they said much the same thing; but no one seemed to know for certain, and I didn't like to ask too many questions about her."

"No; of course not," replied her ladyship, various ideas as to the relationship of the young lady to Mr Baldwin passing through her mind. "But it does seem odd, certainly, that no one should have known anything about her. Don't you think, Jerry, that perhaps it would be as well to make quite sure about her before you do anything more—I mean, exactly who she is, you know, and who her own people are? I should think Lady Sydmonton could do that for you, couldn't she?"

"Ah, very likely," returned Gerard; "but then, you know, I should have to tell her all about it, and I can't talk to her as I can to you, Lily."

"Well then, Jerry, I almost think I should wait a little, if I were you, before doing anything further. Let me see: I wonder whether I could find out anything about her for you. She can't be one of the Castleton Grahams, or I should have heard of her; but it's a common enough name. I know Lady Sydmonton a little, and I daresay I shall see her in London; and I might ask her myself, but," laughing, "I am afraid she might perhaps guess my reason for asking, and I suppose you wouldn't care about that?"

"Oh, Lily, it's awfully good of you, I'm sure," replied Gerard, "but you must not trouble yourself about it unless it comes in your way. The worst of it is, that when I—when I spoke to her, you know, she seemed so strange about it, as if there really was some strong reason against it. And yet she didn't seem angry either; and I can't help fancying, Lily, that she rather liked me."

"Well, Jerry, I think that's quite possible, you know. But now, if you'll take my advice, you won't do anything in a hurry. It does seem to have been a little sudden, doesn't it? I don't mean to suggest that you are not

thoroughly in earnest; but, you know, marriage is a serious affair, after all, and you are still very young for that sort of thing. Besides, Jerry, to speak seriously, for you know I really do take an interest in you, what sort of prospects would you have if you were to marry this young lady? You seem to live very comfortably by yourself, and I know you have got on pretty well; but I suppose your official income is not very great yet, is it? Perhaps your father would allow you something? By the way, Jerry, have you said anything to him about it yet?"

These were home-thrusts, and Gerard winced under them. "Well, Lily," he said, after a moment's hesitation, "to tell you the truth, I haven't told my father; indeed, I haven't said a word about it to any one except yourself and George Morton—you know who I mean, he's a very great friend of mine. I suppose I ought to have told my father; but somehow I didn't want to. Of course, if it had been all right, I must have told him; but, you know, he's rather odd about some things, and as it is, I thought I had better say nothing about it."

"But about the money, Jerry; you know one must think of that. What do you suppose you would have if you were to marry Miss Graham?"

"Well, Lily," he replied, "I must confess I did it rather without thinking; and, of course, when one comes to look at it seriously, it certainly does seem as if I had no business to think of such a thing. I get altogether £600 from my office, including the private secretaryship; and I fancy my father could allow me about £300 a year if he chose. He never actually told me so, but my mother has often talked to me about marrying, and she always speaks as if they would allow me something of this sort."

"Well then, Jerry, say you could produce £900 a year altogether. That's not so very bad after all, and I suppose you will get more from your office some day. Of course you don't know what Miss Graham would be likely to have? She is not an heiress, I suppose, or you would have heard of it somehow?"

"No, I don't expect she's an heiress," replied Gerard, reflectively; "she didn't at

all give me the idea of that. But she might have something, Lily, you know; though, after all, I suppose I've no business to think about it."

"Well, Jerry, it seems to me that you might just have enough to begin on, perhaps; and then of course this Mr Baldwin might be able to do something. If he has no children, perhaps he may leave her his money, and she might turn out an heiress after all. Still, I really think you should wait a little, and not be in a hurry. It's a very serious thing, Jerry, as I said before; and you know you are still very young, and you might very likely do better—I mean, as regards money and all that."

"Ah, Lily," interrupted Gerard, "I only wish you could see her; I'm sure you wouldn't think I could do better in one way, at any rate."

"No, dear Jerry, I daresay not," she replied; "but still, one must think of the other too. Do you know, Jerry," with a pretty little blush, "I had rather hoped you might have taken a fancy to Helen Sartoris. She is not exactly pretty, certainly; but she's a

charming girl, and she will have £2000 a year at least. Not that even this is so very much now-a-days, but still there it is, and I'm sure she would make a most charming wife for any one."

"Dear Lily, how good of you to think about it!" exclaimed Gerard; "I feel as if it was quite ungrateful of me not to be in love with Miss Sartoris; but it never occurred to me, you know."

"Well, one could hardly expect that under the circumstances, Jerry, and I shouldn't like to be considered a matchmaker. However, I am sure you had better take my advice and not be in a hurry."

"I'll try," replied Gerard, rather mournfully, "but I can't help thinking about her, you know. But it's awfully kind of you, dear Lily, to take such an interest in me, and I feel ever so much better for having told you all about it." And he took her hand, and kissed it affectionately.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SAME OLD GAME.

It was the last week in March. For three weeks past a bitter east wind had desolated the face of nature, and town and country were alike unbearable. The season was unusually backward, and a sort of interregnum appeared to have set in, that was neither winter nor spring, but contrived, notwithstanding, to combine the most objectionable characteristics of both. The soft grey tints of winter had disappeared, and had given place to a monotonous drab. Here and there, in some sheltered nook, a few primroses and daffodils had ventured to show their heads, and to struggle against the inclemency of an English spring. But everything else was parched and shrivelled up. Hounds could not run over the dusty plough, the ridges of which were as hard and cutting as razors; even on the grass there was little or no scent; and one blank

day after another was beginning to convince even the most persevering of masters that hunting was pretty well over for that season. In London the black dust lay thick on the pavements, to be caught up every few minutes by a gust of wind and whirled in the faces and down the throats of the passers-by. Old and delicate people took to their beds; and even the young and vigorous were numbed and petrified by the icy blast.

Easter, however, happened to fall unusually early this year, which made it all the more unreasonable that the spring should be so backward. The House of Commons had, in fact, reassembled after the Easter holidays, which had been cut unusually short, with the promise, however, that if members behaved well and got through their work properly, they should be allowed a longer holiday at Whitsuntide. London was pronounced by some to be very full, and by others to be very empty; and the same difference of opinion was expressed as to the social aspect of affairs. Some declared that there was "nothing going on," and that it was going to be the dullest season on record; while others described

themselves as already embarrassed with the number of their invitations, and prophesied a lively time for themselves and their particular friends. But whether destined to be dull or lively, the London season had once more commenced; there was already quite a respectable muster of equestrians in Rotten Row; Bond Street was full of carriages; and, surest sign of all, the various local boards and vestries, who had been carefully watching their opportunity, had begun to pull up half the streets in the West End of London, so that locomotion was already becoming a work of the utmost difficulty and danger.

Among other persons of more or less distinction who had just arrived in the metropolis were the Dowager Lady Narborough and her daughter, who had been what the fashionable intelligence described as "sojourning" in the south of France for the last six weeks. It was Lady Adelaide's fifth season in London, and although her mother was very much attached to her, and was not haunted by any overwhelming desire to get her off her hands, she could not help feeling that it was about time that her daughter began to think

of making a suitable marriage. Not that Lady Adelaide was by any means devoid of admirers; but, as we have already hinted, she had a way of treating them which was not always calculated to attract, and sometimes indeed had even been known to repel. A keen sense of humour is sometimes a dangerous gift, especially in the case of a young lady with no great tendency to self-restraint; and Lady Adelaide had more than once got into trouble on this account, and had, in fact, in the eyes of her more prudent elders, seriously damaged her own prospects. For was it not perfectly well known that the wealthy and estimable, if slightly eccentric, Earl of Barleywater had admired her very much during her second season, and had, in fact, made up his mind to propose? And was it not equally notorious that she had inflicted an irremediable shock upon the feelings of that excellent young nobleman, besides destroying her own very good chance of becoming Countess of Barleywater, by imitating him to his face one day, when he had come to luncheon with her and her mamma, in a manner that even his not very rapid powers of perception could not fail to

detect? Add to this a fondness for saying sharp things, without always considering too carefully the feelings of others, and it will readily be understood that many who might otherwise have been irresistibly attracted by Lady Adelaide were rather shy of overstepping the boundary-line of mere friendship. And yet there was nothing really ill-natured about her. It was a wayward yet lovable nature, impatient of restraint, but capable, in proper hands, of being moulded into something very charming. Those who knew her best always said that if only she came across the right man, she would make an excellent wife. To all appearance, however, the right man had not yet turned up; and in the mean time her ladyship showed no signs of any anxiety to sacrifice her freedom.

"Well, Adelaide, what are we going to do to-night?" inquired Lady Narborough of her daughter, as they sat together at luncheon in Eaton Square one drizzly, chilly day, about a fortnight after their arrival in London. "I suppose you won't want to drive this afternoon, and we may as well give the orders for to-night at once."

To a casual observer, Lady Adelaide would hardly have appeared to take the amount of interest in the subject of the evening's amusement that might have been expected from a popular and fashionable young lady moving in the best set in London. She sat looking before her somewhat listlessly, and there was an air of weariness and as of something wanting about her expressive features that did not seem to indicate a mind altogether at peace with itself. Her mother's question, indeed, had to be repeated before she took any notice of it, and it appeared to be with an effort that she roused herself from her abstraction."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, mamma," she exclaimed, "I was thinking of something else. Let's see, there's Mrs Boston Smith's dance; we must go there,—that's all, I think. There's Lady Rosemary's squash, but I don't the least want to go there, unless you think we ought to; and then you can lie down and get a good rest after dinner, before going to Mrs Boston Smith's."

"No, my dear, I'm sure I don't want to go to Lady Rosemary's," was the reply; "and I think one thing to-night will be quite as much

as is good for you. You look rather tired yourself, and I think you had better get a good rest this afternoon too."

"Oh, I'm all right, mamma, thanks," returned Lady Adelaide, carelessly. "It's only this horrid weather; it's enough to make any one look out of sorts. If it gets fine by and by, I'll take Crisp and walk over to Alice Mount Easton's to tea, and that will do me good."

"Very well, dear, only don't go and overtire yourself."

It may possibly have been the weather that had affected Lady Adelaide's spirits, but as she sat before her looking-glass that evening, with the faithful Crisp operating upon her hair in preparation for Mrs Boston Smith's ball, it reflected an expression of pre-occupation, not to say melancholy, that would have very much astonished any of her ladyship's friends who were in the habit of seeing her only as she appeared in general society, and that could hardly have been satisfactorily accounted for by the caprices of the elements. Was it that after four years of London it had suddenly begun to dawn upon her that after all there

was a good deal of vanity about the whole thing? Or had the right man appeared at last on the horizon of her life, and commenced to exercise a softening influence upon a heart that was generally supposed to be peculiarly unsusceptible to anything in the nature of a tender impression? It is possible that some speculations of this nature may have passed through the mind of Mrs Crisp as she manipulated the silky tresses into a becoming *coiffure*, with an occasional glance at the reflection of her mistress's face in the glass before her, and that, whether right or wrong, she took the liberty of forming her own conclusions on the subject. But it is not for us to pry further into the seclusion of a young lady's bedroom, and we will content ourselves with taking a glance at Lady Adelaide as she appears an hour later at Mrs Boston Smith's dance.

Mrs Boston Smith was a rich and fashionable widow, who occupied one of the largest and roomiest houses in Grosvenor Square, and whose entertainments were much sought after. The antecedents of the late lamented Mr Boston Smith had always been wrapped in obscurity, and little indeed was known as to

the early history of his widow. Some said she had been a governess, and others a bar-maid; while there were not wanting those who maintained that she had been well known in certain art circles, and had in fact obtained her living as a model. Be this as it may, however, she was a clever, fascinating woman, with the remains of great beauty; and the late Boston Smith's wealth having been undisputed, whatever his means of acquiring it might have been, she had long since been taken up and pronounced the fashion by the highest authorities in London. So that a dance at the well-known corner house in the Square was pretty certain to be well patronised by the *élite* of society; and many eligible *partis* and men of distinction, social or otherwise, for whom other hostesses might angle unsuccessfully, would be found attending very regularly at Mrs Boston Smith's.

It was about half-past twelve, and the ball was in full swing. That is to say, the room "set apart" for dancing, in the language of the fashionable intelligence, was about as full as it could hold, and it might have been inferred from the character of the music that a

quadrille was being performed. But except in a comparatively clear space at one end of the room, where royalty was taking part in the proceedings, the dancing was for the most part limited to a few spasmodic advancings and retirings, with no apparent object in view, on the part of a few of the younger and more energetic of the company, the majority having evidently arrived at the conclusion that there was too great a crowd to attempt to go through the figures, and that it was much more satisfactory to stand still.

In the royal set, however, the figures were being got through with a fair amount of precision; and there was room enough for the fresh toilettes and pretty bouquets of the performers to be seen to some advantage. It was, in fact, a very pretty sight; and as the dancers glided backwards and forwards to the enlivening strains of "La fille de Madame Angot," there was enough life and animation to make up for the listless and somewhat depressing character of the proceedings throughout the rest of the room.

In this comparatively animated circle, or, more strictly speaking, square, might have

been observed Lady Adelaide and our old friend the "Cadger," the latter of whom had just arrived, and who, although not much addicted to dancing as a general rule, had at once solicited the honour of her ladyship's hand for this quadrille. The fact was that the "Cadger" had for some time past been very much taken with Lady Adelaide, and was as near being in love with her as was possible for a gentleman of his somewhat peculiar temperament and inclinations. "My dear fellow," he would say to a friend, taking him confidentially into a corner, "she's a d——d nice girl, I tell you; no d——d nonsense about her, and devilish clever into the bargain. I ain't a marrying man, and one has to be devilish careful, you know; but damme, if ever I were to think of that sort of thing, she's just the sort of girl that would suit me down to the ground." And so his lordship would prattle on, alternately amusing and boring his friends with his amatory confidences, but steadily increasing in devotion to Lady Adelaide, and becoming more and more convinced of her superiority to all other ladies of his acquaintance.

It was hardly to be supposed that a young lady possessed of the abilities attributed to Lady Adelaide by her admirer should not have been to some extent conscious of the sentiments she had inspired in his manly bosom; though we are with regret compelled to state that as a rule she scarcely treated his lordship's demonstrations of affection with the consideration they deserved, and would at times, in fact, receive them with the most unbecoming levity. On the present occasion, however, she appeared less inclined to chaff him than usual, and there was an unwonted softness in her manner which was certainly very becoming to her, and which to the enamoured soul of the Earl of Ballybrack rendered her perfectly irresistible.

"I say, Lady Adelaide," observed his lordship, in the intervals of a figure, "that's an awfully nice dress you've got on. I don't understand much about ladies' dresses, you know; but it seems to me there's something uncommon smart about yours."

"Glad you approve, Lord Ballybrack," replied her ladyship, with a pretty little curtsy. "I shall tell my maid, who makes all my

things, that it has been admired by a great judge of ladies' dresses, and she will be quite pleased. Do you approve of the way she has done my hair, now, or can you suggest something different ?"

"Oh, come now; you're chaffing, Lady Adelaide," replied the "Cadger." "But I say, do you mean to tell me your maid makes all your dresses ? By Jove, I wish I'd got a man who could make all my coats and trousers; what a lot of trouble it would save one! Hollo! it's my turn now." And his lordship proceeded to advance and retire with as much grace and dignity as the highly-polished floor would admit of.

"No end of a crowd here to-night," he observed, by way of an original remark, on his return to his partner, "and there'll be some more fellows up from the House soon. I saw Ravendale and some other chaps at the Carlton before dinner, and they said they meant to look in here if they could. Ah! there's Ravendale in the doorway now. Thanks, Lady Adelaide," as the music abruptly stopped, "will you come and have some tea ? it's awfully hot in here."

"Thanks very much, Lord Ballybrack, but I think I'll stop here with mamma. There she is in the corner, by the window. Another dance? oh, I really can't say now; you must come back by and by."

It might possibly have occurred to a very close observer that Lady Adelaide's manner, which up to the present moment had had the effect of putting the "Cadger" very much at his ease, and had rendered her even more than usually charming in that enamoured nobleman's eyes, had suddenly undergone a change, and that, from having been affable in the extreme, and apparently quite disposed to encourage his lordship's not very intellectual conversation, she now manifested a somewhat unaccountable anxiety to get rid of him. Whether the "Cadger's" reference to Lord Ravendale, and the almost simultaneous appearance of that statesman, could have had anything to do with the matter it would be out of place to inquire; but there was no doubt that, as he caught her eye, and made his way through the crowd to where she was standing, a slight though very becoming blush might have been observed to steal over her ladyship's face, and that her

expression lighted up in a manner that it certainly had not done during her conversation with the "Cadger." And yet, whether owing to the proverbial inconsistency of the female mind, or to some other cause beyond our divination, her reception of the Vice-President was not marked by any unusual demonstration of cordiality, and it would have required a very penetrating and experienced observer to construct any matrimonial hypothesis out of their meeting.

"How d'ye do, Lady Adelaide?" said his lordship, as he reached her corner; "how are you getting on? I've only just come up from the House, but there seem to be lots of people here."

"Yes, it's rather too much of a crowd just now, isn't it? but it will get better by and by. What have you been doing at the House, Lord Ravendale? Usual old story, I suppose?"

"Oh yes," replied his lordship, "I've been hanging about there, doing nothing whatever really. We thought we should get into Supply, and I'd got some votes to look after, but there's no chance of it to-night now, so I came

away for a look in here, which seems much more amusing. Are you going to dance this valse, Lady Adelaide?" as the music again struck up; "if not, come and have some supper. The supper-room is open, for I looked in as I came upstairs."

"Very well," replied Lady Adelaide, "I've a sort of idea that I'm engaged for this dance, but I don't mind chancing it; only we must go at once," she added, with a laugh, "or my young man will be after me." And placing her pretty hand on Lord Ravendale's arm, they slipped out by a side door, and joined the string of supper-seekers on the stairs.

"How well Lady Adelaide looks to-night!" observed that consummate judge of beauty, little Billy Treadcroft of the Blues, as he stood with a knot of non-dancing men about the entrance to a temporary structure off the ball-room, lighted with Chinese lanterns of various patterns, and carefully arranged with a view to the comfort of those who might desire seclusion. "Look at her there, on the sofa with Ravendale. By Jove! I wonder whether he means business!"

"Lord bless you, no!" responded another

of the group. "Ravendale ain't a marrying man. Yes, she does look devilish well to-night, but, mind you, I ain't sure that she wouldn't be a rum 'un to marry. However, that don't matter to you or me, Billy, my boy. Come along and have some supper."

"Well, she must have enjoyed her ball," thought the worthy though sleepy Mrs Crisp, as she brushed out her mistress's silky hair that night, or rather in the small hours of the morning, "for she looks ever so much better than before she started. I wish she'd marry now, and have done with it; she'd be ever so much happier, and perhaps I shouldn't have to sit up so much at night waiting for her. There's three o'clock striking! Good-night, my lady."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

UNCERTAINTY.

Those who are familiar with the network of small streets that occupies the space between Pall Mall and Piccadilly, will probably have noticed, at some period of their lives, a somewhat peculiar building at the corner of a certain quiet little street not above a couple of hundred yards away from St. James's Square. The edifice in question has certainly no pretensions to architectural beauty, the exterior, as seen from the street, being suggestive of something between a riding-school and a railway station. The occupants appear to be unfamiliar with the use of windows, and the only means of ingress, consisting of a swing-door at the top of a little flight of steps, adorned with the legend "Private," presents the commonplace and prosaic appearance of the entrance to a warehouse or office. The amount of business, however, transacted on

the premises would not appear to be very great, for, up till four or five o'clock in the afternoon, not a living creature will be observed to go in or out. But about five o'clock some signs of life will begin to manifest themselves. First, one or two elderly but smart-looking gentlemen will be observed to ascend the steps and pass through the swing-door; then three or four more, younger men perhaps, in quick succession; and so on, till by half-past six, from fifteen to twenty-five individuals of all ages from eighteen to sixty, including probably one or two guardsmen in uniform, will have entered the building. At about seven o'clock there will be a rapid exodus, the out-comers presenting the comfortable and self-satisfied appearance that may be observed on the countenances of gentlemen who have just emerged from a Turkish bath, or who have been engaged in some strong exercise for which they feel all the better; and by half-past seven the building will be once more silent and deserted.

Without indulging in any further mystery, we may as well inform those of our readers to whom the above description does not convey

any particular significance, that the edifice in question is the home of the London School of Arms, an institution much patronised by a select circle of guardsmen, Government officials, and gentlemen at large, who are devotees of the ancient and fascinating science of fencing, or who delight themselves in gymnastics and feats of strength and agility. Should a stranger be passing by at the moment when any one is going in or out, he will hear through the door strange sounds of stamping, bumping, and words of command in a foreign tongue. And should his curiosity lead him to mount the steps, and, regardless of the warning as to privacy, peep in through the door, he would find himself in a spacious and lofty apartment, some seventy feet long by thirty wide, lighted from the roof by a long skylight, the walls hung round with rows of foils, masks, broadswords, etc., and the open space in the centre occupied by couples engaged in fencing. Round the room may be seen parallel bars, trapézes, and gymnastic appliances of every description; and a staircase at either end leads to a gallery of dressing-rooms supplied with baths and other comforts of a private club.

It would be difficult to over-estimate the benefits offered by an institution of this kind to any person, of naturally active habits, who is compelled by circumstances to lead a comparatively sedentary life. An hour's exercise under a gymnastic instructor or with the foils has a wonderful effect in counteracting the depressing and weakening influence of a day passed in office work; or, as was expressed by George Morton, himself an old member of the club, in forcible, if homely language, when introducing his friend Gerard, "You can be all day at that rotten old shop of yours, come here and get a real good sweat, and then have a bath, and go out to dinner, feeling almost as fit as if you had had a day's hunting."

Our friend Gerard had been by no means slow to recognise the advantages thus graphically pointed out to him; and, at the period of our story, had not only been for some time a pretty constant *habitué* of the place, but had become a fair adept in the art of fencing, to say nothing of boxing, single-stick, and other miscellaneous exercises. It was a special resource to him during the parliamentary sea-

son, when he was kept close at his work, and could seldom get away for a day's cricket or other outdoor amusement; and having passed the whole day in the not very invigorating atmosphere of the General Enquiry Office, he would drop in at the School of Arms for an hour on his way home, and emerge, as correctly put by his friend Morton, feeling very much the better for it, and quite ready to enjoy his dinner. And since he had arrived at the position of a man in love, he had resorted to the institution more than ever, finding in it the means not only of healthy exercise, but of escaping for the time from the burden of his own thoughts. There are few things that require a more entire concentration of the faculties, both mental and physical, than the practice either of fencing or boxing; and it would indeed be difficult to think of anything else when you have once crossed blades with your adversary, and are watching every movement of eye and hand for an opening lunge, or when you are engaged in manœuvring to plant a successful hit upon your opponent's nose, and at the same time protect your own from a like assault.

One evening, then, about the beginning of May, Gerard, who had been working hard at his office all day, passed through the swing-door of the London School of Arms about half-past six, with the view of getting half an hour's exercise before dining with the Mount Eastons, from whom he had received an invitation an hour or two before, his presence being desired to fill up a sudden gap in the party. He was late, and was making the best of his way upstairs to change his clothes, when he was stopped by M. Pierre, the principal *maitre-d'armes* of the establishment, who, foil in hand, called after him with the air of a person who had some communication to make.

"Ah, Monsieur Courtenay, vous arrivez trop tard," he observed, "voilà M. Morton qui vient de vous demander."

"M. Morton!" exclaimed Gerard, pausing on the stairs, "c'est impossible; il est parti—il est à la campagne. By Jove," he thought, half reproaching himself for not having thought much about his friend lately, "surely he can't be back again, or he would have let me know."

"Non, non, c'était bien M. Morton," repeated M. Pierre, "voilà plus de six mois que je l'ai vu, mais il est venu ce soir, et il vous demandait. Un autre monsieur est venu avec lui—un vieillard, et par exemple il à laissé son parapluie," pointing to an umbrella in a corner. "Mais depêchez-vous, mettez votre veste, et venez prendre votre leçon."

"Well, he must have been here," thought Gerard, as he went upstairs, "but I wonder he didn't tell me. I must go and look him up. Poor old George, I wonder how he's getting on! There's something precious odd about the whole business."

Although, as we have already mentioned, there was a plentiful supply of private dressing-rooms for the use of the members of the London School of Arms, it was found in practice that the majority preferred sociability to privacy, and were wont to avail themselves of a large public room, where they could indulge freely in conversation while dressing or undressing, and could in cold weather enjoy the advantage of a good fire. This apartment was presided over by the principal custodian of the club, an official of

long standing and profound respectability, who, had it not been for an imperturbably courteous and obliging manner, and the gift of being everywhere at once, might at times, when the room was crowded, have found his position rather a trying one ; for being summoned or appealed to every moment, it was about as much as he could do to respond to the many demands upon his attention. "Towel please, Jones!" "I say, Jones, there's no hot water to-night!" "Jones, just ask Lord Lollypop not to sit on my hat." "Hollo, Jones! sorry to see your name in the police court again this morning!" "Look here, Jones ; here's Captain Overalls taken my umbrella, and left that beastly old sword of his instead!" Amid all which badinage Mr Jones, preserving, according to his wont, a perfectly unruffled demeanour, glided hither and thither in the active discharge of his duties, neglecting no one, and attending to each individual requirement with a precision that was truly marvellous. Meanwhile, from the hall or *salle d'armes* below an incessant Babel of sounds ascended to the upper region. "Fondez-vous!" "Carte, contre-carte et riposte!"

from the French professors. "One, two, straighten the arms; slowly down to the sides!" from the gymnastic instructor; mingled with the clash of foils, the bumping of dumb-bells, and the various other noises incidental to the pursuits to which the establishment was consecrated.

Gerard lost no time in changing his clothes; and in another five minutes had descended to the lower floor, clad in flannels and fencing-jacket. Just at this moment he caught sight of M. Pierre in conversation with some one at the door, for whom he was holding it open. But before Gerard had got half across the room, the door was shut, and the stranger, whoever he was, had disappeared.

"Ah, mais voilà monsieur qui revient!" exclaimed Pierre, as he caught sight of Gerard. "Il est rentré chercher son parapluie, mais il était bien pressé, et il ne pouvait rester. C'est bien dommage que vous n'étiez pas ici; peut-être vous aurait-il donné des nouvelles de M. Morton."

"Oh, c'est égal," replied Gerard, unconcernedly, "M. Morton reviendra sans doute dans quelques jours." But he felt annoyed,

all the same, at having missed the chance of hearing something of George, especially as he was unable to avoid a twinge or two of conscience for having of late been so absorbed in his own affairs as to have almost forgotten his friend. For, during the last fortnight or so, Gerard's peace of mind had been greatly disturbed. It would be doing him an injustice to say that he had at any time forgotten his lady-love ; but, at the same time, the distraction of his official work and the bustle of London life had served to divert his thoughts in a great measure from the one all-absorbing topic that had for some time occupied them. All of a sudden, however, an event had occurred which had thrown him back into much the same state of mind that he had been in four or five months before. In other words, he had seen Florence in London. Not indeed, to speak to, which would have altogether finished him, but he had caught a glimpse of her in a brougham in Piccadilly, in company with an elderly lady of, as it appeared to him, a somewhat stern and forbidding aspect, whom he at once set down as ill-disposed towards himself and likely to

injure whatever prospects he might have with Florence. And she had seen him too; and he hardly knew whether he had been made more happy or more miserable by the look that came into her face as she half involuntarily bent forward and her eyes met his. He stood looking after the carriage as if in a dream, till it had disappeared out of sight, and then began almost unconsciously to walk rapidly in the direction it had taken. A few moments, however, brought him to his senses, and convinced him of the hopelessness of such a pursuit; and then he began to blame himself for not having followed the carriage at once. Was it possible that he had actually seen her again! And that look in her eyes; surely she must care for him after all, or she could never have looked like that; and yet, perhaps after all it was only his fancy. Then he tried to remember how she was dressed, and was furious with himself for having only noticed that she wore a light-coloured dress, while he could not remember whether she had on a hat or a bonnet, though his impression rather inclined to the former. Occupied with such reflections, he turned mechanically down Duke

Street, and wandered on in a vague, aimless sort of way, till he found himself at the steps leading down from the Duke of York's monument into St. James's Park. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon; his chief, who had been down at Newmarket, was not expected till four, and he had nothing particular to do for the next half-hour. He went into the park, and sat down on a chair near the water. It was a lovely spring day. All around, the tender foliage, as yet unsullied by London smoke, was bursting into life. The flower-beds were bright with tulips; a blackbird was singing merrily from an adjoining thicket, and the air was fresh with the scent of new-mown grass. The wild-fowl were quacking and diving merrily in mid-stream, or congregated round certain spots where bands of juveniles were engaged in casting on the waters the accumulations of the nursery bread-basket. Everything wore a look of life and brightness, and even the dingy and soot-encumbered buildings in the background were warmed up into a not unpleasing mass of colour by the genial rays of the sun. But to Gerard everything for the moment seemed

blank and dreary. He had seen his love again, and though he felt that he loved her more passionately than ever, it seemed to him as if the gulf between them were deeper and deeper. There she was in London, probably within a mile of him at that very moment, and yet he was as effectually separated from her as if the Atlantic rolled between them. Somehow or other, the possibility of meeting her again under existing circumstances had never occurred to him. It seemed to him as if that never-to-be-forgotten parting in the library at Crowhurst had placed an insurmountable barrier between them, insurmountable at least until the mystery which seemed to hang about her should be cleared up. For a mystery there was beyond doubt; otherwise, how could he account for the tone of distress, almost of misery, in which she had spoken of herself? And yet, what could he do? for he had no possible means of unravelling her history, and he instinctively shrank from anything that might appear like intruding himself upon her. For, to do him justice, he was by no means blind to the fact that, from a worldly and practical point of

view, his prospects as regarded Miss Graham, even supposing other influences to be favourable, could not be considered as otherwise than extremely problematical. He was obliged to confess to himself that he had made a proposal of marriage without any ostensible means of entering upon that highly honourable state, and that if he were called upon to explain how he proposed to maintain Miss Graham in the position to which she had previously been accustomed, he might appear rather at a disadvantage. He felt, in fact, that his proposal had been most rash and ill-considered, and that he had no right whatever, under existing circumstances, to press his suit any further.

It will readily be understood, therefore, that Gerard's reflections that bright May afternoon were far from being in keeping with the surroundings; and during the rest of that day, and the next two or three days, he had very nearly reverted to his original state of hopelessness and despondency. Here again, however, the precious solace and distraction of hard work came to his aid; and it being the

height of the session, and business at the General Enquiry Office in consequence pretty lively, he had happily but little leisure for indulging in the contemplation of his own affairs.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"WHO IS SHE?"

HAD Gerard by any means succeeded in following up the carriage which held all that for the time being was dearest to him in the world, he would have found himself at the door of what would be described in an auctioneer's or house-agent's advertisement as a substantial family mansion in Portland Place—not one of the very largest houses in that highly respectable locality, but presenting at the same time every appearance of comfort if not of affluence. The door was opened, before the footman had time to descend and ring the bell, by a grey-headed old gentleman out of livery, whose appearance was quite in keeping with the exterior of the house, and who bustled out to assist the occupants of the carriage to alight. The first to appear was the elderly lady whom Gerard had noticed, and who, to any disinterested observer, would have seemed

the embodiment of all that was harmless and inoffensive. She was followed by Miss Graham, who, in her pretty morning-dress of some light summer material, would certainly have appeared none the less attractive to Gerard than in her riding-habit, in which costume he had been more accustomed to see her during that brief period of happiness which seemed to him to have passed away for ever.

"Gregson, I shall not want the carriage again till a quarter to eight, and I shall be at home to any one who calls after five. Florence dear, you look tired; you had better go and rest yourself till tea-time, and I will send Edwards to you with some sal-volatile."

"Thanks, so much, dear Mrs Ashton," was the reply; "I think I will go and rest for a little if you don't mind, as I've got rather a headache. I think perhaps it is the sudden heat, but I shall be all right by and by."

"Yes, dear, go and lie down, that will be the best thing for you. Gregson, send Edwards to my room, and then come to the drawing-room; I have got a note to send. Never mind me, Florence dear, you go and lie down at once."

As we have no desire to indulge in unnecessary mystery, we may as well inform our readers at once that the estimable lady whom we have just introduced to them, and under whose hospitable roof Florence was for the time domiciled, was Mr Baldwin's only sister, who had been for some years a widow, and who, being of a kind-hearted and benevolent disposition, and having no children of her own, had for some time past adopted Florence as a sort of niece, and was always glad to have her as an inmate of the roomy and comfortable house in Portland Place. And though Florence infinitely preferred Netherdean to London, and was more at home on the Southdowns than in Hyde Park or Bond Street, she was much attached to the old lady, who had taken a great fancy to her, and done her many little kindnesses; and the result was that she was generally to be found two or three times a year on a visit to Mrs Ashton.

As is usually the case in such establishments, Mrs Ashton was tyrannised over by a select circle of old family servants, who had all waxed fat and sleek in her service, and whose

great object seemed to be to combine the maximum of good living with the minimum of work. At the same time, they were all more or less attached to her, and would gladly have done anything to serve her that did not materially interfere with their own comfort and convenience. A fair share of this good feeling was extended to Florence, especially on the part of Mr Gregson the butler, who, having been pleased to propound the theory that she was delicate and required "keeping up," was much given to pressing upon her at luncheon-time some rare old sherry of his mistress', with the restorative qualities of which it was generally supposed that he himself was practically acquainted; and he had recently even gone so far as to express to Mrs Ashton his opinion that Miss Florence was not looking strong, and that a couple of glasses of wine at luncheon and the same allowance at dinner would be a more effective form of tonic than any amount of doctors' prescriptions. The general verdict, in fact, both of housekeeper's room and servants' hall, was that Miss Florence was a nice young lady who gave no trouble, and to whom therefore they

had no objection as an occasional inmate of their establishment.

"Well, Edwards," inquired Mrs Ashton, awaking from a nap as that confidential domestic softly entered her room to inform her that tea was ready in the drawing-room, "how is Miss Florence? did you give her some sal-volatile?"

"Yes, ma'm, I took it up to Miss Florence's room, but she said she wouldn't have it just then, and asked me to leave it. She didn't seem very well, though, ma'm, and she looked to me as if—as if she'd been a-crying."

"Crying! nonsense, Edwards," returned Mrs Ashton, indignantly. "Why, what should she be crying about?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, ma'm; but she turned her head away when I went in, and her voice didn't seem quite natural, somehow."

"Ah, she had a headache, poor child, and wasn't feeling well," replied Mrs Ashton; "she certainly doesn't seem very strong just now. She's a nice child, Florence," she went on, half to herself; "what a sad thing it is"—— And then she suddenly stopped, recollecting that Edwards was present, and that

it might not be altogether desirable to take her too much into her confidence.

It is hardly necessary to observe that Miss Graham's position in Mr Baldwin's household had for some time been a subject of much speculation and gossip, not only among the other members of his establishment, but also among those of his sister's, the two families being on intimate terms, and the affairs of their respective master and mistress forming a common topic for discussion. It was agreed on all sides that there was something very mysterious about the whole affair. All that was known of her advent into the family was that, some years before, Mr Baldwin had left home rather suddenly, had been absent, no one knew where, for about a fortnight, and had returned home one fine September evening, accompanied by a girl of about thirteen, and a ladylike person who appeared to be in the position of a governess. No announcement had been made of this addition to the family, beyond a letter received that morning from Mr Baldwin by Mrs Styles, the housekeeper, requesting that two specified rooms, opening into each other, might be got ready for imme-

diate occupation. Mr Baldwin, although a man of simple tastes and habits, and accustomed to be a good deal tyrannised over by his household in minor matters, was nevertheless not a man to be disobeyed or slighted with impunity when he had once given an order; and although Mrs Styles' curiosity was excited to a very high pitch by the intimation she had received, she at once set to work to carry out her master's directions.

By half-past six in the evening, the time when Mr Baldwin and his visitors might be expected, the excitement of the household had been wound up to fever heat; and when, after much waiting and listening, the long-expected wheels of the Shawfield fly were heard grinding up the road and turning into the approach, there was scarcely a window or other coign of vantage commanding a view of the front door that was not occupied by an eager spectator, watching anxiously for a glimpse of the new arrivals. Out got Mr Baldwin in his usual deliberate way, and calmly proceeded to hand out first a lady dressed in black, with a thick veil over her face, and then a slight, graceful girl in a short frock, who gazed about her with a half-

frightened, half-curious look in her soft brown eyes. Leading the way into the house, he presented the new comer to the curtsying and officious Mrs Styles, with an intimation that they had had a long journey, and would be glad to go to their rooms. They did not appear again that evening, some supper being taken up to them by Mr Baldwin's desire ; and all that the expectant household were able to glean from Mrs Styles, whose natural self-importance was materially increased by having been to a certain extent taken into confidence in the matter, was that the elder lady's name was Mrs Caledon, and that of the younger Miss Florence Graham.

Without going into further details, it will be sufficient to state that from this evening Mrs Caledon and Miss Graham became permanent members of Mr Baldwin's establishment, and that as the household became accustomed to their presence, the interest which their sudden advent had created gradually died away. It soon appeared that Mrs Caledon was in charge of Mrs Graham's education, and a set of rooms were assigned to their special use. It was understood, not

exactly on Mr Baldwin's authority, but without direct contradiction on his part, that Miss Graham was the orphan child of an old friend of his who had died abroad, and that it was his intention to adopt and bring her up as his own. This alone had a pleasant flavour of mystery about it, and many and various were the speculations regarding the deceased friend who had left such an interesting charge to Mr Baldwin. We regret, indeed, to be obliged to confess that the character of that estimable gentleman did not pass altogether scatheless at the hands of the gossips of Netherdean and the neighbourhood. Not only did his lady-friends ask each other, in the most innocent manner, whether Miss Graham was at all like him, and whether he seemed much attached to her or not, but frequent and more meaning remarks were indulged in respecting the lady who had accompanied her. "Who *is* this Mrs Caledon?" "Is she a lady, or only a governess?" "Is it really true that she sits at the head of the table, and does the honours for Mr Baldwin?" "Really, my dear, I think one ought to know something more about it. Mr Baldwin is very eccentric, of

course, and not exactly in our society, you know; but still, one doesn't like to have this sort of thing going on under one's very eyes, as it were." And so on, in the usual charitable strain so common among a certain class of women, who, kind as they may be, and very likely are at heart, are seldom able to resist the temptation of a sly hit at the reputation of one of their own sex.

But neither Mr Baldwin, Mrs Caledon, nor little Florence were much affected by the suspicions or innuendoes of their neighbours. The former gentleman pursued his studies as usual, and took his walks or rides about Netherdean with the most serene indifference to and apparent unconsciousness of what might be whispered abroad as to his domestic arrangements. Mrs Caledon, on her part, had been but a very short time an inmate of Netherdean before it became apparent to the establishment in general, and in fact to every one who had anything to do with her, that she was not a person to be treated with anything but the most profound respect. It is true that having, at Mr Baldwin's request,

assumed the head of the table when they were alone, she did not vacate that position on the rare occasions when any one else was present; but in other respects it would have required an imaginative genius or a peculiarly slanderous tongue to have set on foot or maintained anything in the nature of a scandal. Not that the elementary materials for the construction of a malicious story were altogether wanting, if the fact of a handsome young woman having come, under somewhat peculiar circumstances, to reside in the house of an elderly bachelor, himself a man whose life had always been surrounded by a certain degree of mystery, could be held to afford such. For handsome Mrs Caledon undeniably was, and apparently quite young enough to have excited the curiosity, if not the jealousy, of the fair sex in the neighbourhood of Netherdean. But, so far from being desirous to attract attention, her great object appeared to be to discourage it; and more than one enterprising gentleman, who were curious to see "what old Baldwin had got hold of," and had on various pretexts effected an entrance to Netherdean in the confident expectation of making an impression on

the handsome governess, were compelled to retire ignominiously under the chilling reception accorded them, and to confess that "by Jove, you know, she won't stand any nonsense. Something about her makes you feel precious awkward. Not business, eh? must be a man somewhere in the background,—can't possibly be old Baldwin." Such, at least, were the covertly expressed sentiments of those adventurous youths who had in vain tried their fascinations upon her, and had come to the mortifying conclusion that all efforts in that direction were unavailing.

As for little Florence, her childish life was altogether undisturbed by the speculations and comments to which her appearance at Netherdean had given rise. Of a shy and timid disposition, it had been some time before she had become accustomed to her new home and the strange faces around her. But by degrees the new life became more and more attractive, and by the end of a year she seemed a different creature. The pure, sweet air of the Southdowns seemed to agree with her wonderfully, and under the gentle and affectionate discipline of Mrs

Caledon her life was certainly far from being an unhappy one. The pretty, graceful child soon became a favourite with every one about the place; though it must be confessed that, next to Mrs Caledon, her affections were principally centred upon Peter, the old coachman who has already been introduced to our readers, and to whom was intrusted the congenial task of teaching her to ride. And an apt pupil she proved, as the old man would tell the neighbours with pride; and it was not long before she was promoted from her first mount, a sedate old pony that had been about the place for years, to an animal of improved paces and more lively temperament. It was a pretty sight to see the pair careering over the downs together on a fine summer's morning,—old Peter on a big brown horse, that had been a good hunter in his day, in his dark-grey cut-away coat and neat drab breeches and gaiters, his weather-beaten face lit up with a proud smile as he kept a watchful eye on the sweet girlish figure by his side, swaying easily to every motion of her spirited little pony, sitting well back, hands well down, and her soft brown hair streaming in the

wind. The girl, in fact, took as naturally to riding as a duck to water; and by the time she was seventeen it would have been difficult to find any one of her own years and experience who had either a better seat or better hands on a horse than Florence Graham. It was, perhaps, the happiest moment of her life when, about this period, she became the possessor of "Kathleen," and, to her unspeakable delight, was allowed to go out occasionally with the harriers. With her first day's fox-hunting and its results the reader is already familiar.

Florence's life at Netherdean, then, though perhaps somewhat lonely, had been by no means an unhappy one. It was some little time before she became accustomed to Mr Baldwin, whose dry formal manner and precise old bachelor habits were not, perhaps, best calculated to win the affections of a young girl. But no one could be long in his company without finding out that beneath a somewhat unprepossessing exterior there lurked a gentleness of disposition and a kindliness of heart that it would have been impossible not to appreciate. Florence had not been a year

at Netherdean before she and Mr Baldwin were firm friends; and by the time she had reached sixteen, that charming borderland between childhood and womanhood which, in some respects, is more fascinating than any other age, she could twist her "padre," as he had been playfully styled one day by his friend Mr Montenello, from a supposed resemblance to some South American ecclesiastic, round her little finger. Mrs Caledon, it should be observed, had relinquished her charge soon after her sixteenth birthday, and though Florence felt the loss of her friend and governess very keenly, she had no particular fancy for another domestic preceptress, and had by this time sufficient influence over Mr Baldwin to persuade him that it would be quite sufficient for the completion of her education—far better for her, in fact, in every respect—if she were to take advantage of Mrs Ashton's kindness, and have some finishing lessons from various masters during her regular and generally somewhat protracted visits to Portland Place.

At sixteen, therefore, Florence found herself,

to all intents and purposes, in the position of mistress of Netherdean. Not that this position had been in any way sought by her, or that it would ever have occurred to her to take advantage of it. Mr Baldwin, as we have already observed, although mild and tractable to the last degree, was a man who liked to be master in his own house, and would, in his own quiet way, have speedily suppressed anything in the shape of an usurpation of his authority. But he had learned to love and cherish the graceful girl who had now for some years been the brightness of his formerly lonely and solitary home, and he would miss her sadly when the time came round for one of her periodical visits to his sister. On her part, Florence had become almost as much attached to the old man as he was to her; and though, with the waywardness of her sex, she would occasionally take a mischievous delight in a little teasing, her fits of "contrariness" never lasted long; and on the whole, no father and daughter could have been more united than this outwardly incongruous pair. There was one subject, indeed, which was to Florence a

perpetual and increasing sorrow, and which was the only cloud over her otherwise happy life. And this, by the way, brings us back to the point whence we started at the commencement of this chapter.

CHAPTER XXX.

EASTHAMPTON PARK.

Autumn once more—that sweetly melancholy period of the year, when we suddenly begin to realise that there are but three or four months left before the time when another Christmas will be upon us, and another year will have been added to the past; a period closely allied in many respects to the autumn of life, to that vague state when one man will be described as middle-aged and another as elderly, but where, in any case, it has become evident that the summer of life is irrevocably gone, and that, although the autumn may be very beautiful and very enjoyable, the next stage must surely be winter, and after that there can be no great change until the very last.

But while it lasts, there can be no doubt that autumn is very pleasant, and is to many persons the most enjoyable and most eagerly anticipated season of the year. For not only is

it synonymous with the opening of the shooting and hunting season, and with the commencement of the pleasantest period of country-house life, but to hundreds and thousands of busy workers, whose position debars them from a participation in the sports of the field, or whose inclinations lead them in other directions, the approach of autumn implies a short relaxation from the drudgery of daily life, and the exchange of the used-up atmosphere of London for the invigorating breezes of the country or sea-side. Autumn brings with it, in fact, a sense of rest and placid enjoyment that belongs to no other season of the year; and its peculiar attributes have many a counterpart in the corresponding period of human life. It has been truly said by one of the most observant and sympathetic of modern novelists that a really beautiful woman is never so attractive as when her loveliness is slightly on the wane; and as for the pleasures and advantages of male fogeydom, there are not wanting those who maintain that they may be favourably compared with the feverish aspirations of early youth.

But whichever way we look at it, the year

will pass away, and however long the golden brightness of the summer may linger with us, it will surely be succeeded by the sober calm of autumn. And once more the autumn had arrived for Gerard Courtenay, who, looking back to the corresponding period of the previous year, could hardly believe that it was nearly twelve months since that memorable night of the Shawfield ball, which had so changed the whole aspect of his life. The summer had slipped by with him very quickly; and with the exception of that single glimpse of Florence in the street, there had been nothing remarkable to disturb the quiet tenor of his life. Work, that blessed distraction of a troubled spirit, had kept him from thinking too much about himself. The session had been an unusually heavy one, and the multifarious duties of the Vice-President of the General Enquiry Office had seldom called for closer attention. Gerard had indeed for the first time begun to take a real interest in his work and a strong personal attachment to his chief, who on his part had settled down to the routine life of a Minister in a manner that was a source of unceasing astonishment to

most of his old friends and acquaintances—had had the effect of making him throw himself into it heart and soul. And the more he devoted himself to his work, the less he seemed to care for the old business of the London season, the ceaseless repetition of balls and parties, and the usual "knocking about." Everything seemed changed in this respect to him since last year; he now experienced a sort of shyness in going into a ball-room, and a feeling as if every one knew that he had proposed to a girl, and had been rejected; and although this uncomfortable sensation would generally wear off after a time, and he would sometimes enjoy a ball almost as much as ever, it was not quite the same thing. And so he gradually began to drop out of the ruck of ball-going young men; and although a certain number of cards continued to be left at his lodgings or at the office, it was seldom that he would take advantage of them, and was more often to be found under the gallery of the House of Commons, to which, as private secretary to a Minister, he had by courtesy the *entrée*, than in the "gilded saloons" of the fashionable world. In short, our

friend seemed in a very fair way to become a highly respectable and hard-working member of society.

It must not be supposed, however, that the blighted state of his affections had altogether deprived him of the power of enjoying life. He had gone in more than ever for such out-door sports and exercises as were open to him, and was beginning to be noticed by the veteran swordsmen of the London School of Arms as one of the most promising of the younger division. He was still, moreover, the possessor of the two noble animals which had carried him through the previous hunting season, and was beginning to look forward to another with a keenness which surprised himself. He had not unnaturally begun to connect his lady-love with his happiest recollections of the hunting-field; and without actually going so far as to contemplate another visit to the Underdown country, he had a sort of vague idea that another hunting season might in some way or other bring them together again. So far, he had stuck steadfastly to his resolution not to attempt to see her again for the present, in which act of self-

abnegation he had been encouraged to the utmost by Lady Mount Easton, who, having originally made him promise to take no further action in the matter for six months, had subsequently urged him to leave it alone till the end of the year. "If by that time, Jerry," she said, "you feel really and truly the same about her, why then I won't say anything more, and, depend upon it, you won't lose anything by waiting. If she really cares about you at all, it's not likely she will have married any one else by that time; and perhaps your own prospects may have improved; for you know, dear Jerry," she added, "you won't mind my saying so, but unless she turns out to be an heiress, you really won't have much to marry upon." And such was Gerard's devotion to and belief in his charming cousin, that although he himself had no doubt whatever as to the strength of his attachment, and it was a hard struggle to give up all idea of even seeing Florence until another winter should come round, by which time all sorts of complications and difficulties might have arisen, he adopted her advice with the most exemplary fortitude,

and endeavoured, though with indifferent success, to think as little about Netherdean and its fair occupant as possible.

As the months rolled on, however, he began to feel that the time was approaching when he could bear his state of uncertainty and suspense no longer, and that, come what might, he must see Florence once more. In the meantime he had a week or two at his disposal, and having been detained in or about London during the greater part of September, he was now, at the end of the first week of October, looking forward to some rough occasional shooting at Easthampton Park, the ancestral seat of his quasi-relative, the Earl of Narborough.

It will be apparent to our readers, from what we have already said of this nobleman's character or proclivities, that he was not violently addicted to field-sports of any description. But, being the possessor of a property which contained in itself what an auctioneer or estate agent would describe as exceptional natural advantages for the rearing and preservation of game, he felt constrained to keep up a certain amount of

shooting, and although, despite the entreaties and representations of his keeper, he did next to nothing in the way of rearing pheasants, the warm, sheltered dells and copses with which the higher ground about the park was intersected, were always tenanted by a fair show of wild birds; while the low-lying ground towards the estuary which skirted one side of the property for several miles afforded very respectable partridge-shooting. So that, on the whole, there was better sport to be obtained on his lordship's comparatively unpreserved property than on many others less favoured by nature, where large sums were annually expended on the artificial production of game.

Easthampton Park was situated at the south-western extremity of Wealdshire; but although in the same county as Sydmonton and other localities we have already described, it was in a different sort of country altogether. The downs here take a bend inland, and the high ground gradually slopes down to a flat, low-lying seaboard, intersected by sluggish streams. The wild uncultivated character of the downs has disappeared, and rolling hills have given place to tame rectangular fields and

trim hedgerows. The Easthampton property lay about half-way between the downs and the sea, and stretched away for some miles along the banks of the muddy river Roding. The park itself was on a gentle eminence, well wooded without being picturesque, and commanding here and there pleasant peeps of the sea on one hand and the line of downs on the other. The house was a roomy, substantial edifice of the Georgian period, boasting no architectural beauties whatever, but solid and comfortable throughout.

The shooting-parties at Easthampton were not, as a rule, very lively affairs. In these days, when field-sports are conducted on a scale of luxury that would have made the hair of our simple-minded forefathers stand on end with amazement, not to say contempt, it requires a variety of solid inducements to prevail upon our "gilded youth" to honour a country house with their sublime presence. Not only must there be good shooting, but the cuisine and the cellar must be of the first order; and in addition to a lively party, including a fair proportion of frisky matrons, fast unmarried girls, and "smart people"

generally, there must be an entire absence of restraint or discipline, and the motto of the house must be "fay ce que vondra." Smoking must be allowed the moment the ladies have left the dining-room, if indeed it has not already been initiated by some of the fair visitors themselves; and a hostess who should even object to the smell of a cigarette in her bedrooms would probably be voted rather unreasonable. In short, the house must combine the selfish luxury of a club with the refinements of a private establishment, or the verdict will be "not good enough," and the gilded youth will betake themselves and their fascinations elsewhere. There are, it is true, a few old-fashioned houses still remaining—such, for instance, as we have endeavoured to depict in our representation of Sydmonton Place—where the well-known sporting character of the host, or the peculiar charms of the hostess, will continue to attract without the usual modern devices which have to be resorted to for the purpose of securing the modern guest. But such exceptional establishments are few and far between; and the result is that the old-fashioned healthy tone of English

country-house life, which used to be at once the admiration and the envy of foreign visitors to this country, is gradually being supplanted by an unwholesome reproduction of modern fashionable life in London.

All this, however, has nothing to do with Easthampton Park, the noble owner of which would have been simply aghast if it had been proposed to him to smoke in his dining-room, and who had only lately, on the strong representations of his wife, consented to the appropriation of an exceedingly uncomfortable and cheerless apartment in the vicinity of the house-steward's room for the use of those who could not exist without their tobacco. Easthampton was, in fact, a very quiet, and, it must be confessed, a somewhat dull place to stay at. The shooting was of course only moderate, according to modern ideas; gambling of any description, even down to penny points at whist, was strictly tabooed; and although no exception could be taken to the eating and drinking, the society was of a somewhat heavy order, and the evenings, despite Lady Narborough's praiseworthy efforts to the contrary, were apt to be rather tedious.

But for those visitors whose principal objects were change, country air, and quiet, the place was not without its attractions. "Bear-fighting" is all very well in its way, and with a well-assorted party of congenial spirits may be carried on without any very serious results. But there are persons who cannot be got to see that there is anything amusing in having "hay" made in their bedroom during their absence, or being "drawn" by a lively party of ladies and gentlemen just as they are dropping off into their first sleep. It is needless to say that this form of diversion was unknown at Easthampton Park; and although the propriety of "doing something to wake up old Narborough" had more than once been discussed by certain restless spirits who found themselves there for the first and only time, and one sprightly dame in particular had volunteered to lead a forlorn hope to the nocturnal storming of his private apartments, with the avowed object of assisting the noble earl into his bath at a time when such an immersion would probably have been extremely distasteful to him, these unhallowed designs never came to anything, and his lordship was

left in peace. On the whole, therefore, Easthampton Park had not a high general reputation in the fashionable world as a place to stay at, and the occasional parties who assembled there during the autumn and winter months were certainly more respectable than lively.

To Gerard, however, who was scarcely in a position to pick and choose to any great extent, and who had not therefore been spoilt by being made too much of, Easthampton was a pleasant enough place to spend a few days at. There was quite enough shooting to satisfy his modest desires; the Narboroughs were always very kind to him, and made him thoroughly at home; and having known Lord Narborough all his life, more or less, he had become used to his little peculiarities, and less disposed to notice or be annoyed by them than an ordinary casual visitor. Moreover, at this time of year anything in the way of a change from London was bound to be more or less agreeable. So he had been looking forward cheerfully to this visit, and arrived at Easthampton, one fine October evening, thoroughly prepared to enjoy himself, and for

the time, at least, to cast all thoughts of his other troubles behind him. From which we fear it will be argued that our hero was not so desperately in love as he would perhaps have wished it to be supposed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MAN AT THE COVERT SIDE.

It was a lovely October afternoon. The sky was blue and cloudless; the woods had scarcely begun to put on their autumn colouring, and were dense and leafy as in June. Here and there a gleam of golden or russet foliage showed that some deciduous tree had succumbed to the mellowing influences of the advancing year; and on the uplands the cleared stubbles and an occasional plough already at work made it evident that harvest was over. But in other respects it might have been a golden afternoon in midsummer, and a glorious day for cricket.

A party of four guns from the Park had been engaged during the early part of the day in shooting partridges on the lower ground towards the river, and were now about to beat one or two small coverts on their way home. It was early for covert-shooting, particularly

in such an unusually fine autumn ; but some pheasants were required for the house, and the keeper was anxious to secure certain hares whom he suspected of wandering proclivities, before they should stray away from the covert and fall a prey to his natural enemies, the neighbouring small farmers. As, moreover, the gentlemen who were sent out shooting at Easthampton were not invariably the most deadly of shots, and were not unfrequently, in fact, apt to be almost more dangerous to their companions than to the game, he was anxious to take advantage of having one or two good guns out to make something of a bag. For on the present occasion the party included not only our friend Gerard, whom we have already seen to be a fair performer, but an old General, a cousin of Lady Narborough's, who, when the walking was not too difficult, was a very deadly marksman ; and the Rev. Thomas Pilkington, the rector of an adjoining parish, who was decidedly above the average. The fourth was an old college friend of Lord Narborough's, a most estimable character in every other relation of life, but who, although manifesting a laudable anxiety

to distinguish himself with his gun, was perhaps hardly the sort of man whom an experienced sportsman would select as a companion in the field, and whose performances were regarded by the keeper with ill-disguised contempt.

It was now about half-past three, and the beaters were about to enter a thick belt of oak copse which skirted the north side of the park for about three hundred yards, and then, taking a turn to the right, ran out almost to a point along the banks of a little rivulet. A rough tangle of briars surrounded the whole, and within, a dense undergrowth of hazel and Spanish chestnut seemed to present an almost impenetrable mass of greenery, where pheasants might lurk with impunity, and laugh at the attempts of the beaters to get them up. These gentlemen now hung about outside, mopping their brows, picking nuts from the hazel boughs, and showing no particular inclination to plunge into the depths of the thicket before them. But Mr Underwood the keeper was inexorable, and proceeded to unfold his plan of operations.

"Now if you two gentlemen," he began,

touching his hat to the General and Gerard, "will go on pretty near to the end, we'll just bring it up to you, and the other two guns will keep ahead of the beaters, one on each side. There should be a few pheasants here, but it'll be terrible work to get 'em up, and they'll likely run on into the gyll yonder. We'll get some of 'em up at the end, though, and there'll very likely be some hares here too. You go along to the corner on the top side, Mr Courtenay, and you sir," addressing the General, "keep along the bottom; you'll find it easier walking. Now men, set in; we've no time to lose."

Away went Gerard along the top of the wood, until he arrived at the corner indicated to him, where he proceeded to take up a commanding position. The ground on this side of the wood was high, and commanded a pretty view across the park, with the calm sea shimmering in the distance on one side, and the hazy outline of the downs on the other. It was hotter than ever. Gerard had had a good deal of walking after the partridges, and felt rather lazy and sleepy. There was not a soul near him; the wood was per-

fectly still; he could just hear the beaters beginning to struggle slowly along at the far end, but it would be a long time before they got near him, and he felt convinced in his own mind that no pheasant would be such a fool as to break from such a covert unless very hard pressed. And as for the hares, they might take their chance. So he established himself comfortably on a stile, with his gun across his knees, and began to think about Florence.

He had been staring vaguely before him for some minutes, in a comfortable state of drowsiness, and was very nearly falling asleep, when—whish—a splendid old cock pheasant skimmed out of the wood just over his head and shot away over the park. Tumbling off the stile, Gerard fired both barrels hurriedly after the bird, now a good distance off, but although he had evidently hit him, he had the mortification of seeing him continue his course with apparently undiminished strength, and make for the bottom of the park. "Hang it all! what a fool I was," he muttered, as he reloaded; "lovely shot that would have been, and I've tailored him too, I'm afraid," and

relinquishing his seat on the stile, he was preparing to keep a better look-out when his ear caught a movement behind, and looking round he perceived that he was no longer alone.

The new-comer was a tall, powerful-looking man of apparently about sixty years of age. He might have been a good deal more or he might have been a good deal less; for although his hair was almost white, a short Vandyke beard and moustache were only here and there streaked with grey, and still for the most part a deep black. And although the weather-beaten and sun-browned face was seamed and wrinkled, the figure was erect and vigorous, and might have belonged to a man not very much over fifty. He was dressed in a slouched wide-awake hat and a dark suit of clothes of a somewhat nautical cut, and was smoking a very long cigar. He might, to all appearance, have been the captain of a foreign merchant vessel, or an American mining agent, or possibly an insurrectionist leader biding his time in England until a fresh opportunity for mischief should arise in his own country. He had, in fact,

the general appearance of a foreigner in somewhat reduced circumstances; but at the same time there was a certain look of dignity and breeding about him which convinced Gerard at a glance that the man was a gentleman.

"Ah," observed the stranger, taking his cigar from his lips, and speaking with the purest English accent, "you were just a little late for that cock, eh? But you've hit him though," he continued, shading his eyes, and following the bird's course over the corner of the park. "Yes, he's down, and I think he's a dead bird too. You'll find him somewhere near the little bridge at the head of the pond by the forester's house."

"Who the devil are you?" thought Gerard; "you seem to know all about the place, anyhow. Yes," he replied, aloud, "I think he's down, but I bungled him frightfully. I ought to have killed him dead, but I wasn't looking out. They've only just begun to beat, and I didn't expect anything to get up so soon."

"Ah, just so," responded the stranger, showing by a nod that he appreciated

the situation. "Rather early for covert-shooting, isn't it? You'll want some leaves off before you do anything much in that way."

"Yes," replied Gerard, "but they wanted some pheasants killed, so we're just having a turn through some of these small coverts outside."

"I see," said the stranger, looking about him with an appearance of interest. "I suppose you'll work along the gyll there afterwards, and finish up near the gate into the road?"

"Yes, I fancy that's what we're going to do," replied Gerard, keeping his eyes fixed on the wood, and determined not to miss another chance. "Wonder who the deuce he is," he thought to himself; "one of these queer friends of Narborough's, I suppose, who's just arrived. You know this place pretty well, I daresay?" he continued, without looking up, but feeling it incumbent upon himself to say something civil.

"Yes," returned the other, slowly, with a peculiar smile, which, if Gerard had seen it, could hardly have failed to attract his atten-

tion; "yes," he continued, "I have been here before."

There was something in the tone of his voice, as he said this, that caused Gerard to look up. But the peculiar expression had now passed away, and he was smoking imperturbably, absorbed apparently in his own reflections. And now a shot or two were heard from the other side of the wood, and the appearance of the Rev. Mr Pilkington round a corner about a hundred yards off showed that the beaters were beginning to draw near. A hare broke away in front of Gerard, and was promptly rolled over, and an old hen pheasant went back over the beaters' heads, successfully running the gauntlet of four barrels from the two guns on the flanks.

"Ah, there are the guns coming up," observed Gerard's friend; "I must be off now. Good-day! and don't forget that pheasant down by the pond." And getting over the stile upon which Gerard had been sitting, he disappeared in a moment.

"Who's your friend?" inquired Mr Pilkington, as he sauntered up a few minutes later, having first compared notes with Gerard

as to what had been seen, killed, or missed during the beating of the wood.

"Haven't an idea," replied Gerard. "He's rather a rum 'un to look at; but he's a gentleman, I could see that plain enough. He must be some one who's arrived to-day, and come out for a walk alone. We shall meet him at dinner, possibly."

"Now then, gentlemen," said Mr Underwood, as he emerged with his red-hot beaters from the covert, "we'll just take the whole of the gyll there up before us. It's a good long beat, but there's sure to be some pheasants up at the end, and I've sent old Joe Diddums round to stop, so they won't run out. Two guns on each side, please, gentlemen; better not get too far forward at first, as they'll very likely come back. You come along of us this time, Mr Courtenay; you'll very likely get a rabbit or two, if you can see 'em."

The gentleman who rejoiced in the somewhat peculiar name of Diddums was one of those nondescript characters who are generally found hanging on in some undefined capacity to the out-door department of a large establishment. He was not exactly an under-

keeper, although he received pay as such, and although no shooting-party at Easthampton would have been considered complete without his presence. He had been in his younger days a notorious poacher, and more than suspected of being in league with the gangs of smugglers who at that time carried on extensive operations along the greater part of the southern coast. But as he grew older, and as his old associates either disappeared or paid the legal penalty of their delinquencies, he became, if not a more respectable, at least a less outwardly reprehensible character, and had now for many years been attached to Easthampton Park in the capacity of trapper, ferreter, and general "odd man" in connection with the keeper's department. Nobody knew exactly how old he was, but he had been about the Park for the last thirty years, and had been well known in the district for some ten or fifteen years previously; so it was generally assumed that he was between sixty and seventy. But he was a wiry, hard-bitten old man, who looked as if he had got a good deal of vitality in him yet, and his intimate acquaintance with every nook and

corner, not only of Easthampton woods, but of the whole country for miles round, made him, although a somewhat independent, yet an exceedingly useful auxiliary to the head-keeper at the Park. He was a queer, unaccountable old fellow, and would sometimes in the summer disappear for weeks and months together, turning up, however, when the shooting season began, just as if nothing had happened, and always contriving to be taken on the staff again. He was anything but a favourite with his lordship, who looked upon him as a disreputable, not to say immoral old man, and who had repeatedly threatened to have nothing more to do with him. But his extensive local knowledge and varied accomplishments had made him so useful to the regular keepers that they seemed unable to do without him; and so, somehow or other, year after year beheld Diddums just as much to the front as ever.

So the party proceeded up Forman's Gyll, as the long winding ravine was called; and it soon became evident that Mr Underwood was right, and that there were some pheasants here at any rate. Three or four had already

got up in front, and fallen to the forward guns, and one or two more had come back over the beaters' heads. But just as they had got about half way up the beat, where the wood took a sharp turn round to the left, it became evident to Gerard, who was outside, and who from his position was able to command a view of the far corner, up to which they were beating, that things were not going altogether right in that direction.

"I say, Underwood," he called out to the keeper inside, "there's something wrong up at the end; I can see the pheasants running out like anything. There's half-a-dozen gone right across the field already, and there's another just going out now. I don't believe there's any one stopping there, you know."

"What the deuce is the old fellow about?" growled the keeper, as he emerged from the wood to survey the situation. "Darn the old devil!" he exclaimed, "he's never got there at all. Here, you beaters, stand steady a bit. Bill," addressing an under-keeper, "you come along o' me, and let's see what's up. You'd better come too, Mr Courtenay, in case any more get up. To think that old Joe should

play us such a trick, now. However, I'll be even with the old 'un, see if I ain't."

A minute's run across the open brought them to the far corner of the wood, one or two more pheasants stealing out and fluttering away as they approached. It was perfectly clear that there was nothing to prevent them from doing so, and it was impossible to say how many might not have already escaped.

"Who'd have thought it now!" indignantly exclaimed Mr Underwood; "there'd ha' been just a nice lot of birds at this here corner, and now just as likely as not they've all run out. Howsomever, we must finish it out now. You'd better stop where you are, Mr Courtenay. Come along, Bill; I'll give old Joe a talking-to when I catches him, you see if I don't."

He was just turning to rejoin his beaters, when his eye caught sight of a figure sitting crouched in a ditch about twenty yards from the end of the wood. He stopped short, as if shot. "Why, darn me if there ain't Joe Diddums after all! Joe, you old devil, what the blazes ha' ye been up to now?"

The delinquent Diddums was sitting low

down in the ditch, with his hands on his knees, and staring straight before him. The healthy, bronzed hue that usually overspread his weather-beaten features had departed, and his face was ashy pale. Large drops of perspiration coursed down his forehead, which he kept mopping in an aimless sort of way with a red pocket-handkerchief, and his eyes seemed starting out of his head. He still, however, retained his consciousness and voice, occasionally ejaculating, "O Lord, O Lord!" in a scared and horror-struck manner. Altogether he presented the appearance of a man who had received a sudden and violent shock to his nervous system, which it would take him some time to get over.

"Why, Joe, what on earth's the matter?" exclaimed Bill the under-keeper, less immediately concerned than his chief in the escape of the pheasants. "B'ain't you well, eh?"

"Well!" roared Mr Underwood, furiously; "he's drunk, that's what he is. Get away home, you old rascal, and I'll take care you don't come out again along of us no more."

"No, he b'ain't drunk," said Bill, regarding him attentively; "leastways he har'nt had

northen' to drink since lunch-time, 'cos he's been alongside o' me the whole way. He looks regular skeart like; seems to me more like some sort of a fit, maybe. Can't yer speak, Joe, and tell us what's the matter, man?" shaking him gently by the shoulders. "Why, you look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"Ghost be hanged!" growled Mr Underwood; "it's drink, that's what it is. Why, he was well enough an hour ago. Shouldn't wonder if he's been and met some o' them poaching mates o' his, who've given him 'arf a bottle o' gin, likely. Why, Joe," he continued, though in a somewhat milder voice, "you've been and let away all them blessed pheasants, and spoilt the whole beat."

At these words the unfortunate Diddums appeared to be partially roused to a sense of his shortcomings. "Pheasants, ah, pheasants," he repeated, in a dazed sort of way, and stretching out his hand for his stick, which lay in the ditch beside him, he stood up, and began to tap against a tree in a vague sort of way, as if half conscious that this was what he ought to have been doing all the time.

"Ah, it's all very well to tap now," growled

Mr Underwood, "but they're all gone. Well, if he ain't drunk, he's precious like it, that's all I can say. Here, Bill, take the old beggar into the road, and send him home. Best go with him a bit, and see if he gets better. You stop here, Mr Courtenay, and I'll go back and get this finished, though it's precious little use now." And he hurried back to the beaters and the impatient guns in the rear, who were wondering what on earth was the cause of all this delay.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DIDDUMS.

"Sorry to hear there was a little *contretemps* about the shooting to-day, Gerard," observed Lady Narborough to our hero, who found himself sitting next to her at dinner that evening.

"Oh, well," replied Gerard, anxious to make the best of the affair, "it didn't much matter, you know. It was just at the end, and we had had a very nice day already; and after all, there the pheasants are, all the same, and there will be all the more to shoot next time."

"It was old Diddums' fault, wasn't it?" queried her ladyship. "I haven't heard all about it, but Narborough," glancing at her husband, "seemed very angry with him. I am afraid he must be rather a disreputable old man; but one doesn't quite like to send him away after being all his life about the

place. Do you think yourself he was really drunk, or was he ill, or what was it?"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know," returned Gerard. "He didn't look to me the least as if he was drunk, and I don't exactly see how he could have managed it in so short a time. But then, again, he didn't look like a man in a fit, you know; no foaming at the mouth, or anything of that sort. No, what Bill the under-keeper said seemed nearest the mark, that he looked just like a man who had seen a ghost. The Gyll isn't haunted, by any chance, is it?"

"Not that I ever heard of," she replied, laughing, "and old Diddums doesn't look like a man who would be likely to see ghosts, does he? I'm sorry it has happened, though, for I am afraid Narborough is rather put out about it."

It certainly did appear as if his lordship was hardly in the best of tempers. He sat gloomily at his end of the table, evidently turning over the unhappy Diddums' long roll of delinquencies in his mind, and thinking how he could best get rid of him. He cared very little about the shooting; but that this wicked old man, with whose enormities he

had put up for so many years, should have presumed to get drunk while on duty, as he felt convinced had been the case, and so bring discredit on his establishment, was not to be borne. He would dismiss him incontinently next day, and give orders that he should not be allowed about the place again. In the meantime he sat silent and grumpy, and made every one near him feel very uncomfortable.

"By the way," resumed Gerard, looking round the table, and anxious to change the conversation from the inconvenient topic of Diddums, "I expected to see a new arrival at dinner to-night. There was a man came and talked to me to-day, who seemed to take an interest in the shooting, and to know all about the place; and I thought he must be some one who had just arrived, you know, and came over for a walk."

"No, there's nobody come to-day," replied Lady Narborough. "Who could it be? What sort of a looking man was he, Gerard?"

"Well," returned Gerard, "he was rather a queer-looking fellow. Oldish man; tall, grey hair, short grizzly beard, and got up some-

thing like a sailor, I should say. But he talked quite like a gentleman, and seemed quite at home here. A pheasant of mine fell some way off, and he told me exactly where to look for it,—down by a bridge, he said, at the end of the pond near the forester's house."

"Bridge," grunted his lordship, who had been listening to the conversation from the other end of the table, "there's no b—b—bridge there; what on earth did he mean by talking about a b—b—bridge?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," said Gerard, "I didn't seem to remember any bridge there myself, and I've been down there several times. But he seemed to know all about it, and it wasn't worth while contradicting him."

"Oh, but you know, Narborough," chimed in Lady Julia, his lordship's maiden aunt, "there was a bridge there once, though it must be thirty or forty years ago, before you were born almost. I remember it quite well when we were children, your poor father, and your uncle, and all of us. We used to call it the Duck's Bridge, because the forester's ducks used to come and sit on it with their heads under their wings, and we used to drive them

into the pond. It was a little wooden bridge, you know, and it gradually rotted away and fell into the water. Oh! it must be forty years since then, quite. Dear me! I wonder who your friend could have been, Gerard. It must have been some one who remembered the place in the old days."

But Lady Julia's reminiscences did not awaken any sentimental feeling in the heart of the present owner of Easthampton Park; on the contrary, the mere fact of an unknown stranger having presumed to display an acquaintance, and that apparently of long standing, with his ancestral domains, was enough to rouse his serious displeasure. "Some b—b—blackguard smuggling friend of Diddums', I'll be bound," he stammered out. "It was he who made him d—d—drunk, no doubt. What business has he hanging about here, I sh—sh—should like to know? I'll have the p—p—policeman up here to-morrow, and have him warned off the p—p—place, and D—D—Diddums too," he muttered, gradually working himself up into a passion, and getting red in the face with suppressed indignation.

"Well, I must say," put in Gerard, who, having introduced the topic of the mysterious stranger, and being, moreover, the only one of the party who had seen him, felt bound to stand up for him to a certain extent, "he didn't look the least like a blackguard; and if he ever was a smuggler, he must have been a highly respectable one. He was dressed in a rough, outlandish sort of way, but I'm perfectly certain he was a gentleman, and I don't think you need be the least uneasy about him."

But Lord Narborough was not to be convinced. He had got into his head that the stranger was in some way or other connected with Diddums; and when an idea had once taken root in his massive intellect, it required no ordinary agency to dislodge it. So he grunted, and choked, and muttered vengeance against Diddums and everything connected with him, and, in short, made himself generally unpleasant to every one at the dinner-table.

"Dear me!" resumed Lady Julia, in an undertone, towards the end of dinner, by which time the conversation had happily been

diverted from the unlucky Diddums, "how strange it was that that man should have spoken about that old bridge! I haven't heard it spoken of for thirty years at least, and I had quite forgotten all about it. Oh dear! it makes one feel very old. Can't you remember what he was like, Gerard? I am trying to think of any one who it could possibly have been."

"Well, there was nothing very wonderful about him," replied Gerard. "He looked like a foreigner, and he looked something like a sailor too. But then he spoke English perfectly, and he had a way of speaking which sounded more like a soldier than a sailor. I mean, he spoke in rather a commanding sort of way, as if he was a bit of a swell when he was at home, you know. You see lots of men like him hanging about in London, but he wasn't the sort of man you'd expect to meet at the corner of a wood down here. But I think the less we say about him the better; don't you?" with a glance at his lordship. "I expect old Diddums will catch it to-morrow."

By the end of the evening, however, it

appeared that his lordship had to a certain extent recovered his temper. "I think it will be all right, Gerard," whispered Lady Narborough to our hero, as he lighted her candle for her. "Narborough has sent for Diddums to be here early to-morrow morning, before breakfast; but I think he only means to give him a good talking-to, and won't send him away this time."

But next morning, when Gerard came down to breakfast, being, as usual, rather late, things seemed worse than ever. Lady Narborough's face wore an anxious and troubled expression, as if she had been having "rather a time of it" with her lord, who sat sulkily at his end of the table, munching steadily at his breakfast, but scarcely deigning to address a remark to any one. A general feeling of discomfort and uneasiness appeared to pervade the whole party, and it was perfectly clear that something had gone very wrong.

"What on earth's up now?" thought Gerard, as he took a vacant place besides Lady Julia. "Diddums again, I suppose. What's the row?" he whispered to his neighbour; "his lordship looks as black as thunder."

"Oh, haven't you heard?" she replied, in the same tone. "Diddums never came this morning, and now it seems he has disappeared altogether, and Narborough's *so* angry about it."

"Oh, is that all?" returned Gerard. "Why, he's always disappearing and turning up again, isn't he? I thought he must have committed a murder at least."

"Oh, but it's such an odd thing for him to go away just now, you know, Gerard; and then Narborough thinks that strange man you saw has had something to do with it. He's really very angry."

"What rubbish!" muttered Gerard, who was perhaps less apt to be impressed by his lordship's little exhibitions of temper than his own immediate family circle. "They oughtn't to let him make such an ass of himself. So Diddums hasn't appeared, I hear?" he continued aloud, addressing himself cheerfully to Lady Narborough, but feeling much in the position of one who should attempt to make a joke at a funeral, or on any other equally inappropriate occasion.

Poor Lady Narborough did not answer,

except to look appealingly at Gerard. But his lordship had heard the observation, and took upon himself to reply.

"No, D—D—Diddums has not ap—p—peared," he stuttered out; "and what's more, I'll take good care he doesn't ap—p—pear at Easthampton again. I'll have no more of these s—s—sort of fellows about the place," he continued, gradually working himself up into a passion, and looking angrily at Gerard, as if he considered him in some way or other implicated in the affair.

"By Jove, what an odd thing!" remarked Gerard, unconcernedly. "However, it will save you any more trouble, won't it, his having gone away on his own hook?"

But his lordship did not appear disposed to see it in this light; and the General by no means mended matters by suggesting audibly to Lady Julia that there might possibly be a lady in the case; an insinuation which had the effect of producing something approaching to an explosion on the part of the noble host, and caused the immediate break-up of the breakfast party.

No further intelligence respecting the

absconding Diddums was received during the day; and, in fact, the remainder of Gerard's visit passed away without anything definite having been heard of him; the result being that Lord Narborough's temper, which was apt to be affected by what to the world in general might seem very trifling incidents, became so exceedingly short that his guests began to wish devoutly that Diddums and everything connected with him were at the bottom of the sea. "What the devil does he want to make such a fuss about?" growled the General; "the man's gone, and as he never liked him, he ought to be devilish glad to get rid of him. If I were my lady, I'd be hanged if I'd stand such nonsense, or else I'd give him something worth while losing his temper about, hanged if I wouldn't, and see how he liked that."

It certainly was rather curious that the old gentleman should have suddenly disappeared in this mysterious way, at a time of year, too, when his services were in such requisition, and when it was consequently to his own advantage to be on the spot. And even if it could have been proved that he had really

been drunk, it was hardly probable that the consciousness of his delinquency should have so weighed upon him as to make him consider it necessary to beat a retreat. He lived all alone in a little cottage on the Ashford Road, about a quarter of a mile beyond the little village of Easthampton; and a careful search over this secluded domicile revealed nothing that could throw any light upon his disappearance. His worldly goods and chattels were of a very humble and unpretentious order; but such as they were, they had been left undisturbed in their usual places. A theory that he had gone off on a poaching expedition was shaken by the fact of his rusty old single-barrelled gun being found hanging up on its usual hooks over the fireplace, together with the accompaniments of powder-flask and shot-belt. His rabbit-traps, too, were all lying together in a corner; and a closer search disclosed certain extremely suspicious-looking wires, which could hardly be said to form any part of the regulation equipment of an under-keeper. And, strangest of all, there was actually a small packet of tobacco, showing clearly either that he had left in such a hurry

as to forget what to him was almost the staff of life, or else that he intended to return very shortly.

But no one had seen him depart; and nothing, in fact, was known of his movements after about five o'clock on the day of his disappearance, at which hour he had been left by Bill Simmons the under-keeper. This functionary had accompanied him as far as the village, and then, as he seemed to have to a great extent recovered, had left him to go home by himself. But Bill stuck to it persistently that he was not under the influence of liquor. "He went very queer as far as the village," he reported, "and kept muttering to himself as if he was dreaming; and then he seemed to get a bit better, and he says to me, says he, 'All right, Bill, I'll get home right enough now,' and then he looked me in the face just as if he wanted to say summat, but he didn't say northen', but he give me a squeeze of the hand, and off he goes as quiet as possible, though he still looked pretty bad. No, he worn't drunk, I'll take my oath, and he didn't smell o' liquor neither."

He had not gone off by train, for he was well

known to every one at the little station, and nothing had been seen of him there. But a few days after his disappearance, the house-steward, who had gone over to the market town of Ashford, about twelve miles off, to pay a visit to the landlord of the Bull Hotel and posting-house, and who had of course imparted the story to his friend, was informed, in the course of conversation, that on the particular day in question a carriage and pair had been ordered to meet a gentleman at the station and take him over to Easthampton, returning again in the evening; that the carriage started with the gentleman on the return journey about seven o'clock, but that the driver was stopped all of a sudden by the gentleman at a cross-roads, about a mile from the village, to pick up a man who appeared to be waiting there, and who at once got into the carriage. It was a dark night, and the driver could not discern the features of the man, who was, moreover, muffled up in a heavy coat; but he was ordered to drive straight to Ashford Station, where he dropped both his passengers. The gentleman was described as a tall, elderly man, with a greyish beard, and answered on the whole

to the description of the stranger seen by Gerard. Doubtless, the driver of the carriage, who had evidently been rather struck by what had happened, might have had something more to say on the subject; but unfortunately he had left the hotel the very next day, having only been engaged on a temporary job; and the landlord had not an idea where he had gone to. Some importance, moreover, was attached to the evidence of an under-gardener, who had been at Ashford market that day, and had gone to the station to see a friend off by the nine o'clock train. A minute or two before the train started, a fly from the Bull had driven up, and two men had got out, taken tickets, and got hurriedly into the train. As they crossed the platform, the light from a lamp fell on the face of one of them, who was dressed in a slouched hat and a coat turned up over his ears, "and for a moment," the horticulturist averred, "I could have sworn it were old Joe Diddums." But just as he was about to step forward and address him, both men got into a first-class carriage together; "and then," as he sagely remarked, "of course

I knowed as it couldn't be Diddums, so I didn't think northen' more about it."

By degrees, however, public interest in the subject died out. His lordship gradually recovered his temper, and in a fortnight's time the disappearance of Joe Diddums had become a matter of past history.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

RED TAPE.

THERE was confusion at the General Enquiry Office. From the Permanent Secretary down to the office-keeper's boy, an expression of concern, not to say dismay, sat upon every brow. Heads of departments went in and out of Mr Mill's room with grave and anxious faces, and junior clerks conversed together in groups in an undertone, exhibiting all the appearance of men who were weighted with a load of secret care and responsibility. Even the messengers went about with pursed-up lips and heads on one side, as if they were the depositories of secrets that, if revealed, might set the whole of Europe in a blaze, and shake the British Constitution to its foundation. In short, it was clear that something extraordinary had happened, and that a complication of an unusually serious nature had arisen in the internal organisation of this admirably conducted Government department.

To come shortly to the point, an appalling discovery had just been made, which threatened to seriously imperil the prestige and reputation of the office, to say nothing of ulterior consequences, the extent of which it would be absolutely impossible to predict. A document of indescribable importance was missing, and the united wisdom of the office was powerless to form the slightest idea as to what had become of it.

For some time past a commission had been sitting at Paris, composed of delegates from the International Office, the Aboriginal Office, and the French and Spanish Foreign Offices, to consider certain important questions in connection with the fisheries of the island of San Fernando, which, as every one knows, is one of our most thriving West Indian colonies, adjoining the continent of South America. The shores of the island had long been resorted to by French and Spanish, or rather Venezuelan fishermen, who claimed certain ancient fishery rights in those waters, but between whom and the islanders there existed a traditional feud, which on several occasions during the last two or three years had culminated in

serious disturbances, not always unattended with bloodshed and loss of life. The matter had, in fact, assumed such a serious aspect that the constant presence of a British gunboat was considered necessary to preserve order on the fishing-grounds, and despatches and diplomatic notes innumerable had already passed between the various governments concerned.

The Commission had now been sitting for three or four months, and the commissioners, finding doubtless that Paris was a very agreeable city in which to sojourn at the public expense, showed no particular inclination to bring their labours abruptly to a close. They had, however, succeeded in delivering themselves of a preliminary report, and the matter was to be brought before Parliament during the approaching session, as a technical question had arisen respecting certain points in the original charter of the colony of San Fernando, upon which, in the opinion of the law officers of the Crown, it was considered impossible to arrive at a decision without being in the first instance formally submitted to the Estates of the Realm. For this purpose

it was necessary to produce the charter, or a properly authenticated copy. The charter itself was in the keeping of the Governor and Legislature of San Fernando; but a copy of it, together with other documents of equal importance relating to the colonies, had always been preserved in the Aboriginal Office in London, until, in the course of years, they had been handed over to the custody of the General Enquiry Office. It was this document that, on being required, was now found to have disappeared.

It would be difficult to describe the consternation that prevailed in the office when this startling discovery became known. The charters, letters patent, and other specially important documents were all kept under lock and key in the chief clerk's own room, in iron-plated closets which were accessible to no one but himself or some other person deputed by him. The particular receptacle wherein the copy of the charter of San Fernando had been deposited had not been opened for some time, and the pigeon-hole where the precious document had reposed was found to be coated with dust, showing that its dis-

appearance must have been of no very recent date. The chief clerk himself was of course above suspicion, and no amount of cross-examination could shake the asseverations of his assistants that they knew nothing about it. Such documents were very rarely required; and the last that could be remembered of it was that it had been had out about ten years previously, to show to some newly-appointed governor, when the chief clerk was able to swear that he had replaced it with his own hands. The wildest conjectures, as is usual in such cases, were freely hazarded on the subject. It was thought by some that, being on parchment, it might have furnished a meal for rats or mice, which were known to abound in the office; and the whole place was turned upside down to see whether the same fate had befallen any other document. Then it was suggested that the chief clerk, who was given to an occasional nap on quiet afternoons, might have walked in his sleep, and, jackdaw-like, have unconsciously secreted the precious document somewhere else. Suspicions, too, were directed towards the family of a char-woman employed at the office, whose eldest

son was known by the office-keeper to occupy a prominent position in a Socialist debating club in Bermondsey, and who might have been a tool in the hands of political desperadoes. But, anyhow, the precious charter was gone, and no amount of speculation had the slightest effect in casting a ray of light upon the cause of its disappearance.

We regret to be compelled to state that the member of the General Enquiry Office who seemed least affected by this terrible national disaster was the noble Vice-President himself, who indeed exhibited an amount of equanimity on the subject that to Mr Mills, the more experienced Permanent Secretary, was perfectly incomprehensible. He had been summoned from Newmarket, much to his disgust, by an urgent and somewhat obscurely-worded telegram from his subordinate, and it must be confessed that when the reason was explained to him, he by no means exhibited the amount of interest that the occasion appeared to demand.

"Well, my dear Mr Mills," he observed, having listened with becoming gravity to that official's tale of woe, "it's a great bore cer-

tainly; but, after all, it doesn't seem to me such a very awful thing, you know. I suppose we can't well get on without it, can we?"

"Good gracious, no, my lord!" replied Mr Mills, horrified at his chief's calmness; "it's certain to be called for the very first thing when the question comes on in Parliament, and it may very likely be wanted before that for the law officers. Why, I really couldn't say how soon it might be required; I should trust not within the next two months, but it's quite impossible to say."

"Well then, what's to be done?" inquired his lordship, standing in an easy attitude before the fire; "I suppose we must get hold of the original, and have another copy made. There is an original of the d——d thing somewhere, isn't there?"

"Good heavens! yes, my lord; the original is safe at San Fernando; that's to say"—— A fearful thought had struck him. What if it should all be part of some terrible Nihilist or Socialist conspiracy, and the original charter should also have been stolen by an agent sent out to San Fernando for the express purpose! Why, if the charter was gone, who was to say

that the island was really a British colony? The question might be raised in the House of Commons by some advanced Radical, anxious for the dismemberment of the empire, and how was it to be answered? In these revolutionary days it was impossible to foresee what Satanic schemes might not be hatching in the brains of the leaders of some secret society, and a plot might be on foot to undermine the whole colonial empire by the simple process of gradually abstracting the title-deeds of each colony? And he, Mr Mills, the justly esteemed Permanent Secretary, would be held responsible for it all! The very thought made him turn deadly pale, and he was obliged to hold on to the back of an arm-chair to support himself. "Oh yes, of course," he continued, though in a somewhat faint and hesitating voice, "the original is safe enough—at San Fernando—of course. Oh no! nothing can possibly have happened to that, I trust."

"Well then, we'd better find out, hadn't we?" observed Lord Ravendale, somewhat astonished at the manner in which the Permanent Secretary appeared affected by what

had happened. "I'm afraid, you know," he went on, "I'm not so much concerned about it as I ought to be; but of course I'll do anything you think right. I suppose there's a telegraph to San Fernando, isn't there? We can just wire out and get an answer in an hour or two, I suppose, and then we can settle what to do next, eh?"

"Ah, my lord," almost groaned Mr Mills, "that's just the worst part of. It's most unfortunate, and seems a sort of fatality, but just at this moment we can't telegraph. I have inquired privately at the Aboriginal Office, and it seems that they are just changing their telegraphic cypher; the old one has been called in, and the new one won't be out at San Fernando for about three weeks yet; so they can only telegraph in clear—in the ordinary way, you know, and we couldn't possibly do that. It really is too unlucky, happening just at this moment of all others." And poor Mr Mills very nearly broke down.

"But why the devil can't we telegraph in the usual way?" inquired his lordship; "what harm can that do?"

"Oh, it would never do," replied Mr Mills,

shaking his head. "It would get about directly, through some clerk or employé, and the whole thing would be known everywhere. No; the only thing will be to write a secret despatch, and we can't do that for another ten days now, till the next West Indian mail goes. Of course the Governor can telegraph back in clear, so that we shall understand, without making any reference to the charter; but we shall have to wait three weeks for that."

"Well then, we must just make the best of it," returned the Vice-President. "I haven't the slightest doubt myself that it's all right, you know. Why, who the devil would want to steal a d——d rubbishing thing like that? Of course I don't mean any disrespect to anything connected with the empire, and the Constitution, and all that sort of thing; but between you and me, no man in his senses would want to steal a rotten old charter. Why, we shall probably find our own copy here before we get another from the colony. Oh no, it's all right enough, my dear Mr Mills; I am sure you needn't make yourself uneasy."

But although the Vice-President's view of the case was decidedly encouraging, the Per-

manent Secretary was by no means altogether reassured. The official mind that has been nurtured for a long course of years on red tape and routine is not always amenable to the dictates of practical common-sense; and what might seem perfectly clear and intelligible to the ignorant and matter-of-fact outsider, will often present itself in a very different aspect to the highly-trained and timorous official.

"There is one thing we shall have to settle, my lord," he continued, "and that is, about getting the charter recopied."

"Well, that's simple enough, at any rate, surely?" returned his lordship; "why, some fellow out there can do it easy enough, can't he?"

"Oh yes, of course," replied Mr Mills, "but then, you see, it's not like copying any ordinary document. We shall have to get it sworn to very likely, and produce either the man who copied it, or else some one who can swear to having seen it compared with the original. We must be prepared for anything of this sort, you know."

"Well then, let them send the fellow over

who copies it, copy and all; there's no difficulty about that, surely?"

"Oh no, of course not, my lord. But, you see, this is rather a delicate matter, and one would prefer not bringing any ordinary clerk or copyist into it, if possible. It seems to me that, on the whole, the proper thing would be to send out some one from here who could bring the copy back with him, and if necessary, swear to having seen it compared with the original."

"Well, I must say that does seem rather a strong order," exclaimed his lordship, "to send a fellow the whole way out there and back on such a business. However, I'm all for doing the right thing, and if you think it really ought to be done, let's do it, by all means. But who is to go, eh?"

"Well, the natural thing would of course be for the Aboriginal Office to send some one out, as it is, strictly speaking, a colonial matter. But if you don't mind, my lord, I should prefer, if possible, sending some one from here, so that we may keep the matter in our own hands, as it were; and then, you know, we need really say nothing about it. The expense

would come out of the Secret Service Fund, and we can keep it all perfectly quiet, I trust. Luckily, you have the power, as Vice-President of this office, of communicating direct with any ambassador, minister, governor,"—reading from a paper in his hand—"yes, 'Ambassador, minister, governor, or other representative of the Sovereign beyond seas, on any subject or matter connected with the archives of the said office,' so there will be no difficulty about it, and no one can ask any questions."

"Oh, I see!" laughed the Vice-President. "Yes, let's keep it dark, by all means; I'm sure I don't want to get the office into a mess. Well then, whom would you propose to send?"

"That's just it, my lord," replied Mr Mills, "It's rather difficult to think of any one. You see, it's leave time just now, and so many are away that it would be rather difficult to spare any one. Besides, too, although it would be a most important and confidential service, it's hardly one that we could expect any of the seniors to undertake, as it would simply be a voyage out there and back, with

perhaps a fortnight intervening ; and they are mostly family men, and settled at home, and might hardly care about that sort of thing. It should be some young fellow who wouldn't mind the knocking about, and whom we could trust at the same time. I suppose you couldn't spare Courtenay, my lord, for a couple of months ? "

" H'm, well, I'm not sure about that," mused the Vice-President. " It would be rather a bore being without a private secretary, certainly. Still, there's not much doing just this moment, and I don't intend being much in London till after Christmas, so I might manage to get on without him. By Jove," he thought to himself, " I've half a mind to let him go. It would be a bit of a run for him, and he seems rather down on his luck somehow. Might do the chap good, perhaps. Well, I'll think it over," he continued, aloud, " and I'll have a talk to Courtenay about it, and let you know to-morrow."

When the proposal was first made to Gerard by his chief, who did not take long in making up his mind on the subject, his first idea was to decline. It was now about the middle of

November, and he had just completed his arrangements for a little hunting. He did not feel quite equal to making his first start for the season in the Underdown country; but he and his two noble steeds had been invited to Storrington for a fortnight, and after that, he thought he might perhaps summon up courage to go down to the enchanted region once more. The expedition to San Fernando would of course take him at least seven or eight weeks, and he could not possibly hope to carry out any of his own private operations till after the new year, which seemed a great postponement and delay. But on second thoughts he was obliged to confess to himself that it was not a chance that ought to be thrown away. There was a certain amount of excitement, too, about the whole affair, and besides giving him a new experience and a glimpse of a new country, an opportunity for which might not occur again, it would be rather a feather in his cap, and might possibly, in some way or other, do him good as regarded Florence. And finding that his chief, who really took an interest in him, was all in favour of his

going, he soon made up his mind to accept the offer, and at once set to work to make arrangements for his departure. The horses were confided, not without a sigh, to the care of the trusty Martin, a hurried visit was paid to the paternal mansion in Somersetshire, and ten days later, Gerard, in company with a most imposing looking despatch-box emblazoned with the royal arms, was proceeding down the Southampton Water in the Royal Mail steamship "Iberia."

END OF VOL. II.

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